

# *Ai No Kusabi*

*The Space Between*

Vol. 4

**SUGGESTION**

Rieko Yoshihara



Yaoi



Novel

# ***Ai No Kusabi*** *The Space Between*

Vol. 4  
**SUGGESTION**

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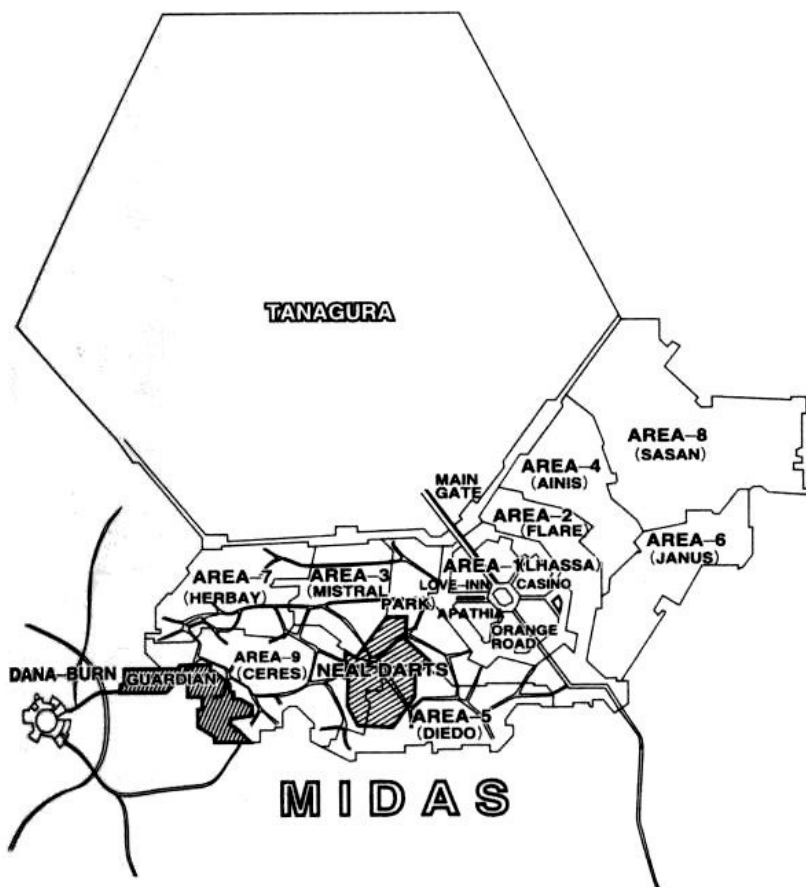
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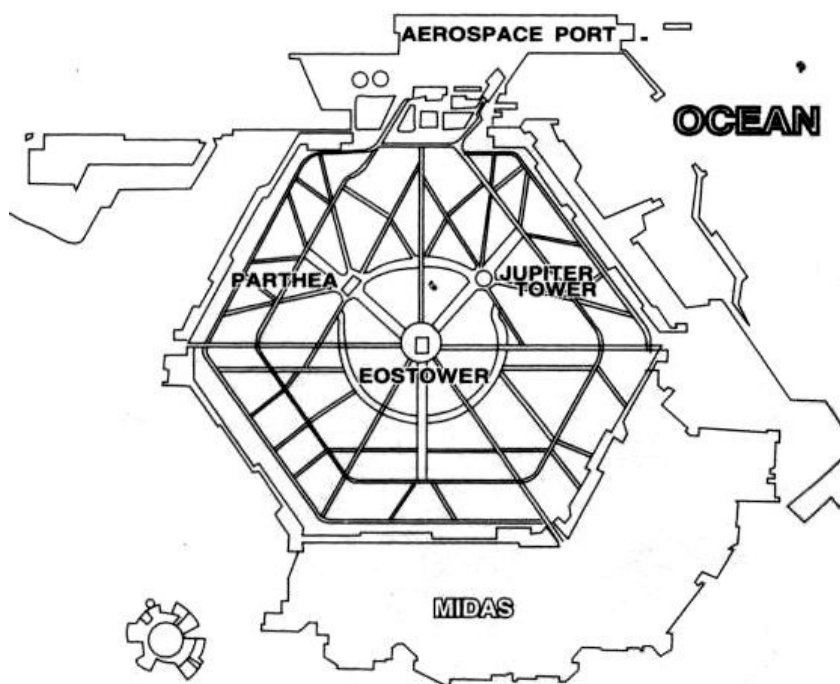
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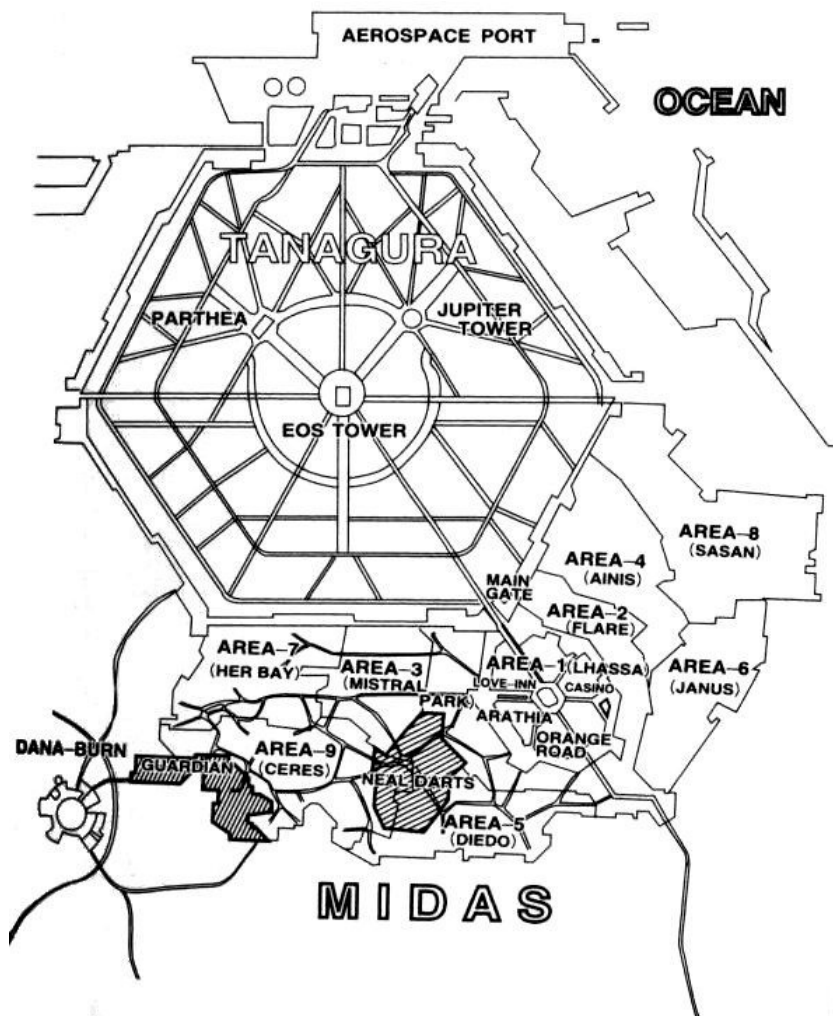
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# TANAGURA





# Chapter 1

For some time now, the weather had been anything but clear and cool. Day after day dawned to brooding, leaden skies that soured friendly dispositions and ate away at the soul. The only silver lining to these very real clouds was that it wasn't raining.

Or so Riki thought as he gripped the handlebars of his jet bike and turned on the ignition.

Midas. Twelve noon. Lhasa.

Though diffused by the overcast skies, the light of the midday sun managed to reach the dark valleys between the outcropping of buildings. Hardly a whisper of human life could be seen on this block of the Orange Road, its inhabitants still sleeping off the previous night's escapades.

Cleansed of her neon makeup, the hideously unadorned face of Ceres enticed in an altogether different manner. Scraped clean, stripped bare, and plastered over, the stains ran so deep in places that it seemed the evil stench would ooze out in drips and drops until the end of time.

However, neither in the gaudy exuberance of the carnival nights nor in the clear light of day was the typical Midas vacationer likely to show his face around these shadowed back streets. The place wound around itself like a maze designed to confuse the senses.

Only those with a clear purpose in mind ventured there.

Riki eased his jet bike down backstreets where night still reigned in the middle of the day. He parked his bike, leaned back against the wall, and lit a cigarette. He didn't usually smoke this much. But now it was the only way to calm his nerves.

It wasn't an oral fixation, but he didn't like the bitter taste, either. It was just the next best thing to a heavy sedative. His slightly raised



eyes flickered restlessly back and forth, searching the corners, his pupils contracting occasionally as if in response to an unsettled thought.

There was a twenty-four-hour drug store right across the street. From the best legal shit to the dregs—"greed," "speed," "rally," and "angel high"—a patron wanting to fly without leaving the ground could buy it there. As it was a state-owned operation, the shopper didn't have to fear product cut with rat poison. But whether or not the stuff would agree with his metabolism was another question.

Of course, there were outlets that dealt other merchandise under the table. But it would cost you.

Riki had his eyes on a different objective. He had no business with this run-down drug store, but with the man who dwelt below. The man who had access to that bleeding-edge cyberworld.

Katze.

Should he take that short walk or not?

He hated things being up in the air. He hated not knowing his bottom line and where it was drawn. Riki wasn't there to make trouble for anyone, including himself. He definitely wasn't there to stick his neck out and get it chopped off.

So, what next? What was his best option?

His thoughts chased around inside his head. The more he hesitated, the more hesitant he became. Perhaps this was a puzzle without a solution.

Or maybe he wasn't really looking for a solution. Or maybe he was too scared to deal with the truth. The smoldering cigarette butts falling at his feet reflected the thoughts inside his head. He couldn't turn his heel and crush them out.

Today was the fifth day Guy hadn't shown his face anywhere. One or two days could be brushed off. But after a third day, he got worried. And all the more when it became clear that Guy hadn't been back to his own place.

Nobody knew where Guy was, or where he had gone. He vanished without a word to anyone. It wasn't like Guy at all. Guy wouldn't dump work and disappear.

However, the members of the old gang had their own reassuring theories about Guy.

"Guy's healthy. Don't you think he's out having some fun?"

"He's always been so fucking popular. There won't be any shortage of volunteers..."

"And after thrashing those Jeeks punks, everyone wants to be his friend."



The members of the old gang didn't fret about him like Riki did.

That didn't mean they weren't worried about Guy's absence. It was more in keeping with the unspoken rule of not poking their noses where they didn't belong.

The pairing between Guy and Riki was falling apart bit by bit. While Riki was missing for those three years, Guy wasn't paired with anyone, but he had no shortage of "sex friends." And after Riki came back, the gang couldn't help noticing that while they used to hump each other on a regular basis, something had changed.

So Riki really didn't have a say about who Guy was doing it with. That was how deep the divide between them had become. Riki understood that. He wasn't about to raise a stink about the seriousness of Guy's vanishing act and blow this thing out of proportion. But that didn't mean he was going to stop worrying.

"I heard some Tanagura elite offered to make Guy his pet."

Riki could have rested a lot easier if he didn't keep hearing the same bullshit rumors about elites making pets out of slum mongrels.

*There's no fucking way Guy would fall for it.*

Though perhaps there was. Vague notions and possibilities bubbled up in the back of his brain and popped open, leaving festering, stinking wounds behind.

If not unease, then fear. The fear only Riki knew and could not tell. To make matters worse, Guy had been seen hanging around Kirie. That alone was enough to double his suspicions.

And more than anything, that shadow of a man lingering at Kirie's back could not but raise the hairs on the back of Riki's neck.

Guy always thought things through, always measured twice before cutting once. There was no way Kirie could easily sell him on anything. Riki knew that.

However, with Iason as his opponent, there was no telling how the dice would roll, all Guy's cautions notwithstanding.

*Iason wants Guy.*

If Kirie wasn't just blowing smoke—if Iason really said it—that would change everything. But what was Kirie in it for? Riki couldn't make heads nor tails of that last thought.

Whatever Iason wanted, Iason got. That was the essence of the man. No matter what, he never retreated from his goal.

Riki's dread of Iason was so strong that he couldn't purge the anxiety from the recesses of his mind. Guy may have ended up with Iason against his will. He couldn't put the possibility behind him.

He didn't know what Katze could tell him, but he might know something. That thought alone had gotten Riki this far. But now, thanks in part to that bit of unpleasantness the other day, he found his feet stuck in mud right when it counted.

But it wasn't that. Not really. Katze had appeared in front of him after four years and said, "Remember this, Riki. Just because Iason took off your pet ring doesn't mean he's through with you. He would never be so charitable."

Ever since Katze had left him with those foreboding words, Riki felt like he was on shaky ground. What was going on? And for what reason? Why would Katze show up now, creating this threatening presence in the midst of his boring existence? Katze's true intentions were always just out of reach.

Riki could live with the antipathy, with the animosity, the scorn. Give it to him with both barrels, out in the open, and he could deal. But Katze was only giving him vague hints and dark suggestions.

Riki had been fine with his mediocre life. The lukewarm, do-nothing days. But with his life so suddenly turned upside down, all Riki wanted to do was grab Katze by the lapels and scream, *What fucking good does this do me?*

At first, he'd assumed that the Jeeks incident had brought about certain inevitable and expected changes. The price for restoring balance in his life. Getting back into business with Katze a second time hadn't been in the cards. And all the more so once he knew the extent to which Iason and Katze were linked with each other.

Those convictions *should* have been etched in stone. Except that Katze—with his connection to Iason—was the only person he could fall back on now. That was the undeniable reality. At the same time, he desperately wanted to avoid stepping into any rabbit holes without knowing what was waiting for him at the bottom.

Riki had dug one too many graves for himself already. Being called "vulgar, unteachable trash" by complete strangers no longer fazed him in the least.

But he didn't want to be the fool making the same stupid mistakes.

So he had to watch his step and not show his hand unnecessarily. That was what he told himself, but he couldn't quiet the nervous excitement in his stomach.

*Katze has to know.* The desire stuck like a hot shiv in the gut. He didn't want the information gleaned from the information networks. Not the shady rumors that came out of nowhere and disappeared into the ether.

Hard, indisputable facts.

As soon as the thought occurred to Riki, Robby's haughty face rose up in a corner of his mind. However, even in the slums, weighing the sure hand of the information merchant God's Grim Reaper against his bad reputation could make a man hesitate. And that—along with knowing that the bill would come due in a form not to his liking—made Riki cautious about reaching out in that direction again.

Robby wouldn't turn down a fair price in exchange for correct intel. But as with the recent business with Jeeks, doing whatever he did wouldn't have settled the score just like that.

Riki wasn't still reliving the run-ins during their time at Guardian. No, if their past had merely been about two kids beating on each other, they could have cleaned the slate a long time ago.

The one thread that tied them together couldn't be broken. In a way quite different from the relationship between Riki and Guy, Riki

and Robby shared roots that went much deeper. That which could never be purged from their shared memories.

Whenever those memories came to Riki, those three years with Iason flitted through his mind, making him grind his teeth.

*Iason Mink.*

The golden-haired, blue-eyed Blondy. The elite who ruled Tanagura. The unbreakable chains of that curse still gripped him. Fetters invisible to his eyes.

"Yo." A hand suddenly clapped down on his shoulder. Riki jerked and spun around.

"What are you doing in a place like this? Didn't think you were leaving home these days."

It was Kirie.

*What the hell is Kirie doing here?* The sudden appearance of the root cause of his problems made Riki furrow his brow.

Kirie's slim frame was clothed in a custom-fit, pink sylvan fur coat. Rings adorned his fingers. As per usual, Kirie was at his off-putting, ostentatious best. Showing up like that in the slums would have gotten him stripped bare and gang raped in minutes. In Midas, though, among the crowds of gaudily overdressed tourists, Kirie fit right in. It was rather Riki, lightly clad in the same old practical jacket and jeans, who stood out.

"Really. What's the story?"

"Nothing to do with you." Even having to answer irritated Riki. There was no way Kirie couldn't read his mood, and yet he just stood there.

"You've piqued my interest, that's for sure. You must have some pressing business to come all the way out here."

"Fuck off," Riki spat out. He couldn't deal with Kirie right now.

But Kirie didn't leave; he hardly blinked. Instead he sidled up to Riki in a far too familiar manner and said in a cloying voice that rubbed Riki entirely the wrong way, "So what does it mean, us meeting here like this? How about we share a drink at a local establishment? My treat."

This was exactly what Riki hated about Kirie. He answered pointedly, "I haven't fallen so low as to start taking handouts from kids."

In the slums, a kid came of age at thirteen. At almost eighteen, Kirie was hardly that. Right now, that didn't matter much to Riki. As far as he was concerned, Kirie fouled his own nest and then just walked away. He'd never be anything but a runt.

The Jeeks incident had all started with Kirie starting a fight he couldn't finish. Just leaving it at that would have been best, but Kirie went after the Jeeks's base with a tear gas bomb, leaving Riki and the others to pick up after him.

In that light, Kirie had no cause for shoving that arrogant mug of his in Riki's face. The kid's shamelessness was fucking unbelievable.

"What's with the bad attitude?"

Kirie was even more calm and composed than usual. He was always blowing smoke. Rather, adding a little extra color to the truth and rumors he picked up off the street—taking things at his own pace—was the way Kirie always carried on. Except having not seen Kirie in some time, Riki thought he seemed more forceful and self-assured.

Fearless, even, conniving, or sly.

On top of that, standing face to face like this, Riki couldn't help noticing that he and Kirie weren't that different in build. Kirie had been a good head shorter when they first met. Now they were the same height.

And for some reason, that pissed Riki off. Perhaps Kirie was as full of himself as any broker or middleman. He still sucked scum and



stank to high heaven. Yet he carried himself like some sainted angel.

From appearances alone, Kirie would be taken for somebody's garish boy toy. In short, he was the kind of nouveau riche type nobody would be surprised to see with a knife in his back one day. A prancing little show-off. But it was just a reflection of his supposed social status. Nothing but peacock feathers.

Even if a mongrel wanted to rise in the world, opportunities wouldn't be falling into his lap anytime soon. That was common sense in the stifling slums. But for the attention-grabbing bundle of ego that was Kirie, he couldn't feel it if he couldn't flaunt it. Still, Riki had no obligation to cater to Kirie's vanities.

"I'd like to have a drink with you. Just one. Let's call it a date, OK?"

Riki ignored him. He went to push past Kirie. Kirie blocked his way, pressed his body against his, and whispered in his ear. "How about we have a word or two about Guy with our beers?"

Riki's eyes shot wide open. The anxieties in his chest stirred like a hive of bees.

"That something you want to hear?" Kirie asked, barely a hair's breadth separating them. A plainly gloating grin parted his lips.

*Son of a bitch!*

Eyeball to eyeball, they shot glares at each other through the thick silence. It was almost as if Kirie's arrogance alone held Riki's wordless fury in check. Barely lifting a finger, Riki could easily seize Kirie by the lapels and choke the life out of him. But if he thrashed Kirie within an inch of his life, he'd be unlikely to spit out anything useful.

A thin smile painted on his lips, Kirie fixed a calculating look on Riki. Was that a yes or a no?

When had Kirie grown such a spine? Riki ground his teeth but didn't avert his gaze. Right now, Kirie was the one with the ace up his sleeve. It pained him to admit it, but he spit out the cigarette

and ground it out with the toe of his boot, the crushed cigarette being the only thing he could turn his anger on for now.

"Let's go."

Kirie nodded, a look of triumph on his face. Riki held his tongue and choked back the bile. He had no choice but to follow Kirie. He didn't ask where they were going. Kirie buoyantly led the way, a satisfied smile creasing his lips.

Kirie had promised to buy Riki a drink, but they weren't heading anywhere near a bar. The drink didn't matter to Riki, so he wasn't voicing any objections. Still, he wondered where they were going.

Kirie crossed the Orange Road with a relaxed stride. He was in his own territory there. Up until the moment they arrived at his gleaming air ear—showing not a single blemish on its silver body—he didn't glance over his shoulder even once to see if Riki was still there.

Dangle Guy in front of him and Kirie knew Riki would snap at the shiny lure. He was that sure of himself.

"Get in," he said with an insolent look in his eyes.

Riki ducked down and slid easily into the seat. He couldn't turn back after coming this far, even if he had no idea what would happen. For the time being, though, he would do his best to ignore Kirie's moneyed vulgarity and insufferable pride.

"This is the latest Stella model. Custom-made. One of a kind. Though I suppose that doesn't mean a thing to a slum mongrel."

Proudly showing off his vast reservoirs of knowledge, Kirie touched the panel next to the steering wheel. Effortlessly, without the sort of rattle that Riki's jet bike had, the car rose up into the air.

Custom-made or a rust bucket, it didn't matter to Riki. The only thing on his mind was Guy welfare. So he kept his mouth shut and let Kirie ramble in his ear without interrupting him. Even if he did get so irritated that he wanted to shove his fist down Kirie's throat and tear his lungs out.

*If this asshole doesn't come up with top-of-the-line intel after all this, I'm going to beat his face in.*

The air ear floated out of Lhassa and turned lazily through the skies above Ceres and the slums.

"You look down at the slums from this perspective and you really understand what a pissy little trash heap we grew up in."

No need to fly around in an air car to figure that out. The inhabitants of Ceres knew it in their blood. It had nothing to do with this particular place or time. No matter what world he was living in, a person lacking a regulation ID was no one.

Their existence had been purged from the official maps of Midas. They only existed as "slum mongrels." Riki had tried crawling out of those slums and in the end, had his ass handed to him. He ended up right back where he started.

But none of that mattered to him now. Compared to those three years when his pride turned to dust along with everything else, the slums were like heaven.

"You came back the beaten dog and I ended up the winner. What a difference, huh?"

*Fishing in this stink hole and skimming a percentage from the take may have made you rich, but that don't make you some kind of winner, asshat! A real winner is—*

A real winner was a guy like Katze. The image of the shrewd scarface rose up in his mind's eye. Riki bit his lip. There was a price to be paid for maintaining a winning streak in the slums. Right now, Katze was undoubtedly squaring his accounts.

But with who? With Iason?

"Either way, your era is at an end. And so many are still paying useless homage to that ghost of yours."

With a sharp, sideways glance, Riki said, "Enough already. Get to the fucking point."

The sense of irritation was clear in his voice.

But the faint smile didn't fade from Kirie's cheeks. "I've been wanting to have a little man-to-man with you. Here we are, gliding through the air, high above everything. It's as good a time as any to hold a confidential conversation, don't you think?"

"I don't have time to go on a sightseeing trip with you."

"Ah, you're that worried about Guy?"

A knowing smile modulated the tone of Kirie's voice.

*Son of a bitch!* Riki thought to himself, but didn't make a sound. Get all hot in the head, let his emotions show, and Kirie would only raise the ante. That was undoubtedly what he had been after all along.

"Well, I'd say your worries at this point are too late."

"Where is he? Where's Guy?"

Kirie said blithely, "Shacking up with some Tanagura Blondy, I believe."

After the second it took for the words to sink in, the blood drained from Riki's face. *No way*, he thought. And then, *Of course*. The two emotions warred within his heart. His vision reeled.

"Chowing down on the finest cuisine day in and day out. Kicking back in the Jacuzzi. I can't say I'm not jealous. A Blondy pet. And all thanks to a very personal recommendation, it seems. Guy's really rising in the world."

"Did *he* say he was doing this?" The pain was evident in the subdued tone of Riki's voice.

Kirie sighed dramatically. "What idiot wouldn't take a bite at that apple?"

Riki still couldn't believe what his ears were telling him. There was no way Guy would take off like that without telling him. But that

possibility, however unlikely, was far preferable to the one that he could barely bring himself to contemplate. But that didn't change the throbbing pain reaching down to the core of his brain.

"No matter what anybody else says, we all think we're the fairest of them all. Wouldn't you agree?" As the words spilled from Kirie's mouth, Riki felt something like a hot spike jamming into his throbbing guts.

*We all think we're the fairest of them all.*

Exactly the same words Riki had turned over in his mind five years ago. Unable to tolerate living any longer in the slums and rotting from the inside out, he'd cut his ties to venture out on his own.

*You've only got two hands to hold onto the most important things in life.*

And what he couldn't hold onto had to go. That was what Aire told him.

*Never let go of what's most important to you. Make no mistake, Riki. Once you let it go, there's no getting it back again.*

Aire was right. So right he could taste it. He'd been the one taking reality too lightly, as if he were master of the universe. It was too late to start regretting it now.

His pride in who he was. The chance to live life his way. And Guy, his better half, impossible to replace. Those were three things he wanted in his life, and he had even severed his ties to Bison so that

he could keep them. Aire had said only two, but Riki told himself that what he couldn't hold in his two hands, he'd carry in his mouth.

He'd believed it was possible. Rise high enough in the black market and someday he'd make it all come true. He'd spared no effort. Scorned as slum trash that would never amount to anything, in the face of the ridicule and naked animosity, he'd racked up results with brain and brawn and hustle, silencing his critics.

Picking up every marker laid down and meeting every challenge head-on didn't mean an easy ride. But no spark landed on him that he didn't immediately douse. Surviving in this meritocracy required more than a good head on his shoulders. If he didn't want to get fucked over, his strength had to be something more than show.

Though the violence and brutality did not equal that of the slums, the raw strength of the studs and stallions was put to the test in the black market. So no quarter was given or taken.

It was not the strong who won—it was the winners who were strong. This fundamental truth worked in the slums as well as the market. Only the added value of the effort differed.

However, the road Riki believed he had chosen was paved with quicksand. He'd been racing along in a dream across a surface Iason had laid down. This was a one-way street. No U-turns allowed. The people in charge could rewrite the traffic rules anytime they wanted.

*Human fate was under their thumbs.*

Riki had never believed it was so. And yet the reality of the human equation could not be denied. Riki could never forget his great fortune in meeting Guy at Guardian. Call it mere happenstance, but to Riki, that meeting was an absolutely necessary factor in the equation of his life.

Because that meeting was what gave him a reason to live.

*It's OK. You're not in this world all by yourself. I'm here with you.*

That's what Guy had told him, wrapping his arms around him when he slept alone, his body freezing to the core. The warmth of Guy's body saved him. Riki clung to him, never wanting to let him go. The rest of the world could go away as long as he had Guy there next to him.

So they paired up immediately when they were declared adults at the age of thirteen and released from Guardian. Nobody else would be allowed to steal Guy away from him.

That should have been enough. But other desires emerged.

Riki could no longer stomach the thought of throwing his life away in the decaying slums. So he threw away his years with Guy. Into the ditch. All of it.

What else would he call that chance meeting with Iason? Call it fate? Or luck, or predestination, or something completely different. Maybe just links in the chain of reality.

At times, it felt like some unavoidable destiny for Riki. And now the thought made him swallow hard; a wet shock licked up his spine. When he thought back on those three years with Iason, filled with lust and self-loathing, his muscles twitched and throat trembled.

He never wanted anyone to know that part of his past.

He was holding onto something he never wished to let go of again. No matter what, something he could never part with: the essence of what made his existence matter.

So Kirie calling him a beaten dog didn't bother him. The extraordinary tenacity that Kirie exhibited in order to be counted among the winners wasn't part of Riki's value system anymore.

But in order to preserve that inviolable part of him, he hadn't tipped Guy off about the truth behind this pet business. If he had, Guy would have read between the lines and begun to notice things.

Like what Riki had given in exchange for all those pleasures.

A veritable sex buffet, free of morals and taboos. Though that was what they all imagined in the slums, the repugnant thought of articulating how deeply the human body could be conditioned to the unending and unrestrained foreplay—such that all pride and reason rotted away—

That feeling when his nipples were devoured until they stood like nails—of being possessed by a fiery passion—

The unbearable throbbing, grinding against his burning groin—

The scalding and obscene elation mingled with pain that arose even as the ring bit painfully into the most compromising of a man's organs—

And more than anything, the ecstasy as Iason plunged his shaft deeply inside him, all but breaking his body into pieces—

No matter how despicable and unwanted and resisted—and even if given with an arm twisted behind the back—it was an undeniable, mind-blowing pleasure.

Sex with Guy left him with just a sense of satisfaction. Satisfy and be satisfied. Heal and be healed. One reaching out and not refused by the other.

But sex with Iason was completely different.

When he had resisted, Iason had ripped the pleasure out of him. Made him pant until each breath tore at his throat. Pushed him again and again to climax. Screwed and assaulted and debased him, squeezing out of him every last drop of desire. Carrying him away, body and soul.

And through it all, the even greater agony was knowing that the pleasures wracking and inflaming his body could not be denied. The



thought ricocheted through his mind: *was Guy now experiencing that daily intoxicating shame?*

Remembering all this made a throbbing pain pickle his loins, shocking Riki back to his senses.

*Did he hunger for it even now?*

Unable to rid himself of the rising unpleasantness roiling inside him, Riki bit down on his lip. But as if aroused by a still-smoldering awareness, the tingling sensations throbbed through him still.

Kirie looked over his shoulder at him. No, he was *staring* at him. Not blinking. Just taking in his profile.

*Where is Guy right now?*

But Kirie wouldn't know.

*Is Guy really living the good life as Iason's pet, enjoying all the riches Iason has to offer?*

Kirie would have no way of finding out. And neither would he have any grasp of Iason's true motives.

This late in the game, ignorance was Kirie's bliss. The unshakable truth was that he'd done as he was told, had ensnared Guy and sold him to Iason. That was all. The important thing to him was keeping in touch with a Tanagura Bloody. The pieces of silver taken in exchange were an added reward.

Kirie would use whatever tools he had on hand and throw away whatever didn't suit his purposes. Thanks to that ethos, business was good. He thought he had it all coming to him. No one could call him slum trash anymore.

Kirie couldn't contain the smile rising to his lips. They all held him back while he picked at leftovers and table scraps. They all sought the languid comforts of the hive mind while standing in his way. He wasn't one to stare at his feet all day long. The only place he was

looking was up.

He had no time to look back over his shoulder at the past.

That was the life he knew he should live. But then why did Riki still have this hold on him? Why this constant sliver under the fingernail?

*Guy became a Blondy pet.*

It took this statement to strip the cold mask from Riki's face. So what side of himself would he show to the world if Kirie told him the truth? The impatient possibilities burned and throbbed in his gut, rising up his spine to stab at his raw desires.

He wanted more. More of the real Riki dragged out into the light of day.

The impulse could not be refused. Kirie switched the navigation to autopilot and sat back lazily in his seat. As if entranced by Riki's furrowed countenance and drawn lips, Kirie brought his lips close to Riki's cheek and whispered in his ear.

"What if—what if I *sold* Guy? What would you do then?"

"What are you saying?" Riki asked darkly after he let a moment pass.

"Ten thousand. That's what Guy was worth. Just what you'd expect from a Blondy. They don't skimp on this sort of thing. Frankly, paying that much for Guy is a mystery to me. I just don't know what's going on inside the heads of those elites."

If Riki allowed himself to get angry right then, it would be like lightning bolts loosened from a storm, or raging plumes of fire from a volcano.

Kirie felt goose bumps on his skin.

But it wasn't from the fierceness of Riki's emotions. Far from it. This was Riki's true nature, and it sent a quivering, like hot pulsations, down his thighs, prickling his skin. Made his heart race. Sent

shivers of excitement down his spine. Had he finally unmasked the legendary head of Bison once more?

No. Not just the head of Bison.

Kirie suddenly remembered the night when Riki barely broke a sweat beating up those Jeeks punks. What Kirie had glimpsed through the darkness, as a silent bystander, watching and observing—that had been the real Riki too.

The jet-black hair and eyes. His body clothed in dark colors rarely seen in the slums, prompting whispered rumors that pureblood roots were hidden deep down in his DNA.

Riki didn't look like anybody else. And the shadows cast by his existence weren't ordinary, either. That was why, Kirie had heard, Riki was called Riki the Black.

The normal Riki treated everybody but Guy with cold indifference. But when the metamorphosis came on, an undisguised ferocity shone in his eyes. He was the Destroying Angel. A black-winged beast of myths and legends, that prophesied death and ate men's souls.

All who looked upon him were transfixed. One glimpse, and grown men would throb between the legs, gripped by lascivious lusts they'd never experienced before, welling up and drawing them inexorably toward him. Burning to the point of pain, the blood boiling in their veins, tearing their insides apart. Their brains tingling and numb. Racing pulses pounding in their throats. Anyone who met Riki would rise to his bidding and go mad.

"What would a Tanagura elite want with a slum mongrel like Guy? Well, that's hardly for me to say. The important thing is that the channels are open between me and that Blondy. You think I could pass that up? No way."

As Kirie chattered on and on, he became aware that, inflamed by the aroused sensations in his nether regions, he was provoking Riki far more than was necessary. *Go ahead and hate me all you want*, he thought. Only by shoving the truth in his face would Riki's eyes and

heart be his and his alone. Kirie simply couldn't part with the pleasures of that masochistic fantasy.

"You never know," Kirie said nonchalantly. "Even Guy might have been waiting for the chance. And somebody was there to give him a push when it counted."

A second later, a heavy, wet crunch.

Riki's iron fist exploded against the side of Kirie's head. Kirie saw stars. His vision blurred. A dull lethargy numbed his brain. And yet he couldn't stop running his mouth.

"And—if Guy wasn't—your partner—you wouldn't give—a shit—" He slowly wiped the blood from his mouth with the back of his hand. "Right?" He glared at Riki. "He's really such hot stuff? You and him being pairing partners is ancient history. Right? You two even get to first base anymore? So what gives you the fucking right to get so pissed off about him becoming a Blondy plaything?"

Riki spaced out for a moment. All of Kirie's misdirected rage spirited him back to Guardian and that business with Robby—

"I haven't done anything I'm gonna feel sorry about," Kirie spat out, his eyebrows deeply furrowing. "We're all rotting here. If selling my own flesh and blood was what it took to crawl out of here, then I'd do it! And don't give me that crap about living out your life in the gutter, 'cause it's not for me!"

Selfishness so pointed it cut to the bone. Emotions born out of desperation. Riki knew the wellspring from which Kirie's character sprang forth, and that was why he hated him.

*Life can't get any worse than it is now, so I've got nothing left to lose.*

Kirie reminded him so much of his younger, naive past that he couldn't stand being anywhere near him.

"You all act like you're so high and mighty now, but there was a time when you'd have done exactly the same thing."

Riki's dark eyes gleamed as they focused on Kirie. Fearing that

another blow was soon to land, Kirie instinctively recoiled. But only Riki's mouth moved.

"Put this thing down," he said in a cold voice. And when Kirie stared back at him, as if frozen in place, he added, "Unless you want to see this custom-made jalopy of yours turned into scrap, get it on the ground now."

Dread echoed through his words. This was not a simple threat. But one suffused with death.

Kirie stiffly sat back in the seat and faced forward. "Not here. Orange Road."

His hands rested awkwardly on the steering wheel as he stepped on the accelerator. Arriving back at Orange Road, he slowly broke left and bled speed. Sliding down the approach path, the air car found purchase with the ground.

The door opened with a faint hum. Cold air pricked at the skin before rushing in to fill the cabin. Riki jumped out without a backward glance.

"You don't ever want to show me your face again, Kirie. Not if you want to keep all your limbs."

*Better a beating than being ignored for the rest of my life!* Kirie wanted to scream at him, but he just clenched his teeth and choked down the words.

After leaving Kirie behind, Riki headed straight to the back entrance of the drug store. He was going to have a talk with Katze.

*Shit! Shit! Shit!* But he couldn't control his roiling temper and racing heart. *That son of a bitch Kirie! Next time I see that fucking little bastard I'll kill him!*

And yet there was something dull and numb at the core of his brain. *How did things ever come to this?*

Even with each long stride, he couldn't stop the trembling in his legs.

*Was it me? My fault?*

He'd lost the ID card Katze had given him. So he tried pressing his left hand against the horizontal slot in the security panel. If his palm print was still in the system, the elevator doors would open.

Even that brief moment waiting for the computer aggravated his temper. But a moment later the light switched from red to green. He breathed a sigh of relief. His personal authentication code hadn't been deleted. Or rather, maybe this was the ever-vigilant Katze in action. He'd predicted that Riki would make this move and had updated his records. Though in his current state of mind, getting turned away at the door might have been preferable.

"Shit."

The antique electric elevator rattled and shook the same way it had four years ago. What had changed was Riki, and the situation he now found himself in.

Katze wasn't surprised by Riki's sudden appearance. The security system had undoubtedly confirmed his arrival as soon as it confirmed his palm print. Katze's office presented the same stark tableau as always. The same decor. The same sofa there for arriving guests. The neat and orderly desktop that reeked with an obsessive-compulsive air.

The only thing different now was that Riki wasn't waiting patiently on that sofa until Katze finished up the day's work. There was no warm reception waiting for him, nor was his presence desired. If Katze let him walk in unchallenged, then he wasn't going to be ignored.

"Aren't you at least going to ask me what I've been up to?" Riki asked, hands thrust into his pockets.

Katze glanced at him. He didn't say, "Hold on" or "Get lost."

"Or have you been expecting me all along?" Riki pressed. Taking the silence as confirmation, he said, "If so, then spit it out. What does Iason want with Guy? And why use Kirie to get the job done?"

He cut to the heart of the matter. It wasn't that he couldn't stand to wait. Rather, it was that he couldn't collect his thoughts until he heard the words coming out of his mouth.

Katze came to a break in his work. Or ran out of patience. He sat back in his executive chair and slowly raised his eyes. "Why don't you ask him in person?" His cool demeanor was worlds apart from the attitude during his visit to Riki's apartment. This Katze was the unflappable and calculating black market broker. "I'll set it up for you, if you want."



It was a response Riki hadn't been ready for. His expression



hardened, as did his thoughts. He had gone there to get to the truth. And Katze had thrown him a curve ball, making his mind scatter.

Riki spat out with all the venom in his chest, "You think you can just sit there with a straight face and fucking yank my chain?"

Katze fixed Riki with his gaze. Not even an eyebrow twitched. "I'm yanking your chain?"

"I came here to talk to you man-to-man. And you want to crack dumb jokes?"

A small silence strained the empty air. In that moment, Riki grasped that strikingly different motives were at work. The line drawn between them was bright and clear. Whether to hold his ground or to venture forward—the decision was not Katze's. It was all up to Riki.

He stared back at Katze. "So how do I arrange a meeting with Iason?"

And yet this sharp knocking of heads had dampened his seething fever somewhat. Riki needed a lead, a clue. Kirie had spilled the goods despite himself. All Riki wanted from Katze was what he didn't already know: Iason's true intentions.

"Do I have to get down on my hands and knees and beg for Guy?" Riki asked, but he knew better than anyone that Iason would never cave in so easily. "He wouldn't even get up to brush me off." Really, he'd be lucky to get only that. Any face-to-face with Iason was unlikely to end on such a civil note.

"You think you can pull a few strings and snag him just like that?" Riki barked out the question in derisive tones. "He's got better things to do with his time than waste it on a used-up pet."

*I have to meet him*, he was on the verge of saying, but he bit his lip hard.

Katze lit a cigarette, feeding his favorite habit. He knew perfectly well that Riki had been spying on the drug store long before he showed up in the shop. That was what security cameras were for.

The cameras covered the area surrounding the drug store from every angle, peering into every nook and cranny. And on one of them, Riki made his appearance.

*So he finally showed up*, Katze thought. Then he looked again and there was Kirie. The two of them took off somewhere. Katze watched the scene play out, as Kirie came in and snatched Riki away. But not long after that, Riki came back, barging in. One look at his face and Katze had no trouble imagining the circumstances surrounding Guy's disappearance.

Riki gave Kirie no respect at all. But Kirie digging around in Riki's past was still fresh on Katze's mind. As was the way Kirie stuck to Riki like a lost puppy.

Though Kirie still tried to imitate Riki, he never could, despite his own fierce magnetism. When Iason was informed of this, only the corners of his mouth turned up. No question why Iason chose to make use of Kirie for this particular job.

Katze knew that Iason was waiting for Riki to make the first move. For Riki to send word for Guy.

"You know what Iason is capable of," Katze said. "He'd get no pleasure from dragging you into his lair and tormenting you. But dangling your old pairing partner in front of you and examining your reactions—that's as good as dinner and a show for him."

There had to be limits to the tastelessness of a man's predilections. Even Katze could agree on that point. Those who knew only the cold-blooded Katze wouldn't have believed their ears to hear him say so.

These were no Sunday afternoon matinees. Deprive the slum mongrels of the game of watching and waiting for their brothers to crash and burn, and they'd never taste the thrill of the gamble. The only excess to be found was in the abominable burlesque of the final act.

But Katze only thought that way because he had skin in the game.

This time things were different. From the very beginning, from that first domino Riki tipped over five years ago, Katze had been Iason's accomplice. And even now, he wasn't about to pull down the curtain and end the show.

And Iason had only let the domino fall because he'd been in a whimsical mood that night. Katze didn't know how and where Iason had first laid eyes on Riki. But from the start, he hadn't seriously harbored the thought that a Tanagura Blondy had rigged this whole game just so he could fuck himself a bit of slum trash and then cast it aside.

Somewhere along the line he'd made a miscalculation. But it was more than a mere miscalculation. Something he'd completely failed to account for. A turn of events catching everybody off balance. Something to make even Iason sit up and pay attention. *There was nothing half-assed about Riki's abilities.*

By the same token, Katze as well had probably fallen under Riki's spell. Calling Riki a slum mongrel just like himself was a lie. Even handicapping the race and calling the outcome a draw, Riki was the superior breed.

Riki could always clear the board in the allotted time, and escape the trap before the steel jaws shut him in. He had unwavering pride, ambition, and wiles at the disposal of his inexhaustible willpower.

He wasn't a worthless mongrel that, when all the stupidity was beaten out of him, was an empty sack. With a little polishing, this unpromising rough stone became a gem. Riki was that kind of ore. And the joy known by the prospector was what Katze had experienced himself.

*His prize.*

He wouldn't let his hopes for Riki die. When Iason's whimsical mood passed, Katze planned to keep on using Riki as his apprentice. He would bring out the gleaming brilliance that lay within.

But that assumption was his first mistake. Iason was not about to let

go of this uncut diamond so easily.

As long as Riki was free to swim the waters of the black market, the two of them had an understanding. But then Iason decided to collar Riki and feed him from his own hand.

Unbelievable. The sudden loss of all that Katze had pinned his hopes on stung him to the core. A pain as if he'd lost a part from his body entirely. Never in his life had he experienced anything like it.

After that, Katze admonished himself to never let another person into his life again. He never imagined that the sins of the past would come due in the form that stood before him now.

"Whether you meet him or not is up to you. Let's dispense with the mind games and cut to the chase. The only way to get this done is to do it and see what happens next."

Katze laid out the logic, goading Riki. Riki hadn't come there so Katze could point him in the right direction. He was there so Katze could open the door and shove him through it. So Katze could pry his fingers away from his hard-earned freedom.

As painful as it was to realize, Katze had already purged his conscience. Guy was nothing more than bait, the chum in the water to lure Riki into the net. Otherwise, Iason never would have paid Kirie such a generous bounty.

Ten thousand *kario* for a slum mongrel. A king's ransom. The absurd dimensions of the deal made the mind reel. That Kirie had so brazenly demanded such a sum left Katze speechless.

Iason must have permitted himself an ironic smile as well. Knowing that the game had gone well beyond farce, he allowed the con to continue and paid the piper. Katze didn't know what to make of it. Though how Iason spent his pocket change wasn't up to him.

Guy's only value to Iason was as Riki's former pairing partner. So Iason wouldn't lay a hand on him.

Katze knew where Guy was being held. He'd made use of those facilities before—where quarantined cargo could be comfortably

confined, but not in shackles. But he didn't let that information slip, since he knew Riki would heat the living crap out of him as a thank-you.

What did Guy mean to Riki? Katze knew that too. After Iason instructed him to make use of Riki, Katze had done a thorough investigation.

*Two sides of the same coin.* That was how strong the connection between them was. So he hadn't said a thing to Iason. Or, rather, he hadn't felt the need to. He couldn't imagine Iason attaching himself to Riki after such a fashion. He had come to these facts after a preliminary investigation at best, after all.

Iason had destroyed that relationship by making Riki his pet. Katze couldn't say what had become of it in the three years after each had lost his wingman. Iason had revealed nothing to him about Riki's life as a pet. And Katze hadn't had the slightest interest in Guy.

Yet without him saying anything, word of Iason's unconventional, unbecoming, and downright strange behavior had reached Katze's ears.

The Pet Law of Tanagura did not recognize the human rights of pets. Pets were, from beginning to end, the property of the elite. Their little love toys.

So why would Iason snub Pet Law—and worse, why he would take such risks and expose so many loopholes in order to return Riki to the slums? It didn't make any sense to Katze.

From the start, Katze had never believed that Riki was free and clear, that he'd won his freedom for good. Because there was no way Riki was anything but a mere pet in Iason's eyes.

Katze had been an appliance in Iason's household. Eos furniture. He knew how pets were handled. He knew more than he could ever forget. And especially how Iason treated his personal property. He couldn't purge that knowledge from his mind.

Katze simply did not have the means for divining the true nature of

the relationship between Riki and Iason. Once Iason made Riki his pet, the information conduit to Katze was cut off. The whole thing lacked for precedents. Not to mention that keeping a male pet in his late teens around for three years was similarly and strikingly unusual.

During that time, Iason did not mate him, but kept him for himself. If true, then it was stranger than any fiction Katze could imagine. If true—if Riki really had changed the legendary Ice Man so dramatically—then Katze's envy and admiration for him knew no bounds.

And his heart went out to him in a whole new way. Riki was the one who had uniquely possessed his master, so aloof from the world in every other way. From the shadows, Katze had surely sought to test those capabilities, and had been entranced by the satisfactory results.

Iason had collared Riki as a pet and brought him to heel. And yet, the pet had collared its owner. How ironic.

Moreover, provided Katze was not mistaken, Iason was aware of this as well, and thus was attempting all the harder to draw Riki back into the fold.

*But why?* Why was he so fixated on Riki?

Katze couldn't imagine what was going through Iason's mind—and he wasn't sure he wanted to make himself think that way, either. If he climbed out on a limb simply to satisfy his curiosity, he'd end up paying a stiff price when that limb was cut. Katze knew this was no groundless fear.

He wouldn't needlessly stick his neck out if he didn't have to. That had always been his bottom line. And remained so. It stood to reason he'd be in no hurry to lay all of his cards on the table. After all, like everybody else, Katze loved himself first and foremost. Even if that meant remaining in this dark and gloomy servitude for the rest of his life.

Iason's own hand had left this sear on his face. Even now, he could

not purge the memory from his mind. Mending the deep gouge was a simple medical procedure, but one that Katze had never contemplated.

He kept the scar as a mark of his fidelity to Iason, just as the name he was known by about the black market—*Katze the Scarface*—served as a reminder of his youthful naiveté and inexperience.

And yet when Riki stood in front of him, those sensations cut out of him long ago throbbed back to life, such that they could not be ignored. The thorn in his side that he should have extracted long ago still pierced his flesh.

"I don't think Iason has any designs on Guy," Katze said, speaking the truth that would have been clear to anybody. "If he did, he wouldn't have gone to such lengths. He must have had other reasons for paying Kirie so much."

It had become perfectly obvious that Iason was trolling the waters, looking for Riki at the end of his line.

"A passing whimsy would be over in a few weeks or so. After that, the merchandise would get fenced through back channels. Or at a black market auction. That kind of thing. Though the integrity of the product coming from those venues is hardly guaranteed."

Riki's face grew a shade paler before his eyes. "Is that supposed to be some sort of threat?" The question emerged jagged and hoarse.

"Threat? Don't take this the wrong way, Riki. I've got nothing to gain by threatening you. You're here for my honest assessment of the situation, right?"

"Sounds more like you're trying to get a rise out of me. What if I said I wanted a face-to-face with Iason?"

"Then would I be correct in concluding you're only making that request because you can't think of any other way to get Guy back?"

Riki bit his lip, momentarily at a loss for words.

"What does Iason intend to do with Guy?"

"What to do with Guy—? That's really not up to Iason, is it? The ball's in your court, Riki. How was it for you? I'm sure it's all coming back to you now."

Katze looked back at him, his voice even and unwavering. But Katze couldn't suppress the feelings of disgust rising up in his gut. He was behaving just like Kirie. And though his conscience might not recoil, Katze still couldn't help grinding his teeth.

Riki couldn't answer. Despite the hurricane howling in his heart, he couldn't wrench open his lips. If he could, he would steal Guy away from Iason and take him back to the slums. More than a mere desire, it bordered on a scream of necessity. That was the kind of fire that Guy's existence lit in him.

On the other hand, deep inside, the chains binding him to Iason stubbornly persisted.

The disgraceful title of "pet." The curse of a mere toy. The obscenity of his servitude and slavery. All logic and reason seduced by pleasure. All self-control shattered. The festering shame and humiliation. Pride rotting on the vine.

Those three years with Iason, imprisoned by the chains of lust. Even after three years, the rich, clinging, and poisonous carnal desires trembled and stirred his loins, rising up like a drug-induced hallucination. As if to mock him, his memories would not stay buried in the past.

So even after returning to the slums, Riki couldn't sleep with anyone. He feared that unfettered, even temporarily, he would turn into something that was no longer himself.

And yet his body desired that numbing intoxication. The blood burned in his veins, eating at him like acid as he was held prisoner by a thirst he could not slake. The uncontrollable hunger—yielding to neither reason nor self-restraint—haunted his thoughts wherever he went.

There was no way he could meet with Iason while the Blondy commanded this strange, unknowable force in his heart. When it



came to his concern for Guy and the anxiety gripping his gut, there was this line in the sand he could not cross.

The unsteady seas of contrary emotions pounded at his thoughts. Gritting his teeth in the face of the dilemma, he could see no other avenues open to him.

## Chapter 2

The days dragged on with Riki unable to discipline his tangled thoughts into any kind of definitive conclusion. A week passed. Then ten days. And yet Riki remained indecisive.

*What do I do?* At this juncture? Knowing that Kirie had sold Guy out to Iason, the shock and anger gripping his heart turned the world black in front of his eyes.

And as if to drive the point home, Katze had issued him that unspoken ultimatum. In any case, there was only one path left open for him to take.

No matter how well he understood—even *though* he understood—he could not take that final step. All his angst didn't alter the reality of Guy's disappearance in the slightest. Now he quailed at knowing for certain what Iason's true intentions were.

*We all think we're the fairest of them all.*

Kirie's taunt still rang inside his skull. He was fine in the light of day. Whatever dull, repetitive bit of manual labor came his way, simply putting his body into motion put the thoughts out of his mind.

But as soon as the sun went down, the anguish welled up like the beating of a tell-tale heart. If he touched bases with anybody, talk of Guy was sure to come up. So he didn't hang out with any members of his old gang. But neither did he like the looks he got when he visited unfamiliar dives.

Ever since giving Jeeks the beating they deserved, rumors of Bison's comeback had hung in the air. To Riki and the gang, it was all dust in the wind. A bad joke. Yet leaving their own motives out of the picture only made the rumors fly faster and fiercer.

It was a pain in the ass. In the end, Riki wasted away the nights nursing a glass at an old watering hole. Knowing he couldn't get himself completely wasted, he drank sparingly. The fear of losing

control and losing his mind served as his unconscious watchdog. But he still did all he could to dull the tumult in his mind, and drank what he could until his brain went numb.

When Guy opened his eyes in the morning, he found himself not in the comfortable surroundings of his own pad, but in a bedroom now familiar enough to his senses to suggest he had been there before.

The same unfathomable sigh spilled from his lips. Guy was back in the jail cell of another bad dream.

If this was an ordinary dream, then at some point he would wake up. For whatever reason, there was no way out, no exit to the nightmare that brought Guy there.

Or, rather, that was how bad dreams always played out. But push come to shove, this place was—the confining conditions of house arrest notwithstanding—far superior to his own crappy room in the slums. Which perversely made waking up to reality worse.

And so he ate and slept and sat in a stupor in front of the tube. There really was nothing else to do. Security successfully thwarted every attempt to escape, and he soon gave up on the idea.

Adorning the humdrum interior decor was a fashionable new model of telephone. But it wasn't connected to anything. There were no network connections. Aside from the usual shit offered up on the television screen, every bit of useful information was censored out, and what remained proved suffocatingly insipid.

He had nobody to talk to. He was tired of talking to himself. A sigh was the only sound escaping his lips. There was no way to avoid the awareness of the solitary state of his confinement.

It was boring. Boring. *Boring*. Having so much time on his hands was more painful than he could have believed.

Ten days passed.

Guy never saw the Blondy who'd imprisoned him there again after

the first day. A Bloody named Iason Mink.

*Why?* What was going on? What did he have to do with this? What was going to happen next? The questions festered day by day, wearing on his nerves. No answer was forthcoming.

"This joke ain't fucking funny anymore."

Words were his only recourse. He had absolutely nothing else.

The cold night wrapped its icy arms around Riki. He stumbled back to his room and threw himself on his bed. Like a stiff rope cracking under a hard strain, all the joints in his body took on a lethargic numbness. He didn't bother taking off his clothes. He didn't even bother turning over.

The thoughts in his head had turned to sludge. His eyelids felt like anvils. He sank into the freezing puddle of the chilly dark night.

Triggered by the release of the front door lock, the temperature of the apartment soon rose automatically, adjusting itself to a more comfortable level. Before long, without a murmur of complaint, Riki sank into a deep sleep.

He had no idea how much time passed after that. And it didn't matter. His dry throat suddenly aroused him from slumber. He weakly pried open his eyes. His tongue felt like sandpaper. His mouth was too dry to summon up any saliva. His throat was so parched his body seemed to be baking from the inside.

"*Shit.* What the—" he grumbled, his head still half-buried in the pillow.

Listlessly he raked the hair back from his forehead. His leaden brain still refused to admit he was awake. His sluggish, numb thoughts remained less alive than dead.

Riki half-crawled, half-dragged himself out of bed. He got heavily to his feet and staggered not to the kitchen, but to the bathroom. Before quenching his parched throat, he had to clear his clogged

head and rinse the stench of alcohol from his skin. It was one or the other or both.

The sound of rushing water roared painfully in his ears. Riki emerged from the shower, toweling off his wet hair as he pulled on a bathrobe. In the kitchen, he mixed some concentrated juice together with mineral water and gulped it down.

Finally, some sense of life returned to his body. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, took a deep breath and let it out. He put down the glass and turned, intending to head back to the bedroom that doubled as the living room in his studio apartment.

Riki froze in place. A light he didn't remember turning on filled the room.

But that wasn't it. The glow from a phantom, a mirage, shone in his eyes.

*Iason?*

Struck dumb. Riki couldn't move.

*What's going on?*

In contrast to his wordless, trembling lips, his heartbeat pounded painfully at his temples. His wide black eyes stared motionless, as if rejecting what they were seeing.

*An illusion?*

But his tortuously racing pulse and the cold, tingling spasms crawling up his spine would not allow him to escape this sudden reality. Because there, right in front of him, was Iason's cool and beautiful countenance. The Blondy said in an easy tone of voice, "It's been awhile, Riki."

The concreteness of that voice—that Riki hadn't heard in a year—clawed its way through his ears and into the center of his brain, cementing the truth of what he was seeing.

Riki suppressed the shudder that ran through his body. He

instinctually squared his shoulders into a guarded stance and growled. "Get the fuck out."

But instead of expressing anger, his voice grew shrill and unnaturally hoarse. It didn't rebuff the intruder, and it didn't help discern his reason for being there. Riki's thoughts simply hadn't had the time to collect themselves at that point.

Not to mention that telling Iason to get lost and making him were two completely different propositions.

Nevertheless—or even because of it—he had to say something. Speaking his mind was his only means of drawing the line and clearly marking the distance between them.

Or so he wanted to believe. And yet—

"You want to head out looking like that?" Iason asked, not the slightest hitch in his voice. "Don't you and I have some business to take care of? Namely about Guy?"

Iason played his trump card with a poker face.

At that moment, Riki felt the fire rising in his throat. *Shit*— he started to say, but swallowed the words before they left his throat.

The options Katze had held to his head like a gun that day morphed and changed into the form that stood in front of him now. That realization was scathing, enough to make his heart seize in his chest.

Riki settled into his stance, braced himself, and clenched his fists. His eyes tilled with bloodlust as he stared back at Iason. But that was all he could do.

"Frightening. You look like you could actually tear my throat out." Iason smiled crookedly. "I believe I actually felt goose bumps."

In stark contrast to the supposed lord of the manor—who bared his emotions and bristled like a porcupine—the uninvited guest remained calm and composed.

"Today makes two weeks. I expected to hear from you already. I apparently miscalculated."

The malice buried within the insinuations in Iason's voice rubbed Riki the wrong way, accompanied by a needling, stabbing pain. He clenched his fists so tightly his fingers were turning white and beginning to tremble—because of his irrepressible rage—or his emotions having no other form of release—or because of the fear imprinted on his subconscious—Riki himself couldn't have said which was which. This was a whole different situation. On a whole different level. And an overriding sense of hesitance bound him hand and foot.

Iason calmly made himself at home on the old, moldy sofa. He sat there, relaxed, suffusing the room with an unwavering self-confidence and imposing, impenetrable dignity completely at odds with the cramped warrens of the slums.

This was the unblinking reality. And yet despite the oppressive weight of the real, Riki still could not grasp what would explain why Iason had injected himself into this environment.

*In defiance of Katze's warnings, I refused to show my cards. So Iason came all the way here to force my hand?*

A Tanagura Blondy had come to the slums alone. That fact could only be taken as the cruelest of practical jokes. Contemplating Iason's true intentions, Riki felt a cold chill snaking down his spine.

So he refused to think about it. What he was experiencing was simply too impossible for him to believe. The dead silence strangling his thoughts grew painful. The pain became too intense to stand. Riki at last let the sparks fly.

"So what is it you want to say to me? You want me to kneel down and kiss your feet?" He grasped desperately at any fragment of reason. "Don't tell me you came all the way here and busted into my place while I was asleep just in order to sell Guy back to me. So what do you want?"

He controlled his voice as best he could manage. All the screaming

and yelling in the world wouldn't budge Iason in the slightest. But keeping himself on an even keel wasn't easy. He couldn't entirely quiet the spasms shaking his hands, his feet, and his guts.

"Katze has been issuing these veiled threats and warnings about how making this problem go away is all up to me." Riki choked down the bile rising in his throat. "The way you're talking sounds to me like you're using Guy as some kind of bait to get me back."

He finally put it into words—the knot in his stomach, festering bad feelings that his all-night drinking binges could not disguise.

"He's your old pairing partner, isn't he?" The question plucked mercilessly at Riki's taut nerves. Though Iason's voice was warm and inviting, its undertones were hollow and thin. "So what do you think I should do with him?"

"Do with him?" Riki echoed, his voice ragged. He felt Iason's serene gaze wrapping its talons around his heart.

"Unlike you, he's too old to start from scratch. It's not worth it. I suppose I could cut to the chase, drug him up and use him for sex whenever a lascivious thought crosses my mind. How about it? Or tinker with the gray matter a bit and turn him into an obedient slave? Sell him on the black market? Or in a brothel? How he ends up really depends on your next choice."

"You—must—be—joking—"

Riki's words emerged haltingly and muddled.

Iason icily replied, "His fate is in your hands."

Katze had spoken the same intimidating words. But Katze's voice could not compare in the slightest to the sudden impact coming from Iason's mouth. Neither the tone nor the weight.

And more than anything, the look in those eyes held Riki frozen in place. More than the irrationality of being forced to choose between two evils was the force of intimidation that made him feel like he were being pushed off a cliff. Iason was forcing him to resolve—here and now—all the confused thoughts and unanswerable



questions that had been muddying his mind these past two weeks.

And in a manner to Iason's liking.

Riki couldn't speak, as if his throat were constricted by the churning blood in his veins. All he could do was bury his fears and channel all his burning passion into his eyes as he glared at Iason.

And Iason met that look with his own overwhelming air of superiority. A look the same as when they had met five years ago in Midas, a cold countenance that betrayed not a particle of concern about what anybody else might think. The ferocious, calculating tranquility that only men of absolute power possessed. Eyes that reflected that same divine right of kings.

Iason was undoubtedly an android Blondy, whose brain alone had been transplanted. And yet those azure eyes stared so fiercely as to completely set aside their finely crafted and artificial origins.

The uncompromising and fractious silence devoured one minute after the next, exhausting Riki like slow water torture, leaving him on the verge of breaking. Tension building upon tension with no respite. The silence digging like a thorn into his sides. The hostility sharpening as each passing second sparked and festered and burned.

Suddenly, Iason came to his feet. As if in concert, Riki started; his eyes leapt in response, a vivid reflection of the balance of power between them. Iason closed in on him, one step and then another. With each step, the suffocating intensity of his presence grew, forcing Riki to unconsciously retreat.

"That's far enough!" Riki cried as the tension shattered all at once, leaving his restraint broken at the lightest of grazes.

But Iason didn't stop. "Why?" he asked, the sarcasm buried in the cool inquiry deliberately provoking Riki. "What is there to be scared of? This is so unlike you." With a derisive smile, he cast aside Riki's apparent loss of nerve. "Is this hard-nosed attitude your one redeeming trait after all?"

The strength of Iason's unwavering gaze rooted Riki's feet to the floor. "You were taking forever to make up your mind, so I decided to drop in for a little visit."

Iason's unflustered voice spoke with an absolute power that wouldn't allow Riki to look away for an instant. He felt his flesh prickling. The impulse to retreat shot through his body, down to the tips of his toes. His pounding pulse clawed away at the fear crawling up his spine.

And yet, Riki somehow held his ground. There was no way he was caving in so quickly. If he showed Iason any weakness, he'd just be the Blondy's pet again.

There was no way. *There was no way that was happening.*

"So what's your move, Riki?"

From this close distance, a coolly serene gaze fell on Riki. *The choice is up to you*, those eyes were telling him.

Iason could easily just take Riki with him, wringing out his willfulness without breaking a sweat. But that was not what Iason would do.

*A sacrifice is meaningless unless offered up willingly.* That was what this was all about. The first offering had been extracted by force. The second must be given freely. After that, there would be nothing left to withhold, no excuses to give.

Iason had cornered him. Cut off all escape routes. Made him an offer he couldn't refuse. And so Iason waited. Waited for Riki to deliver himself up freely.

Riki swallowed hard.

"So, toss him overboard or meet the asking price."

"Where am I supposed to find that kind of money?"

Ten thousand *kario*. That was the price on Guy's head. Not a sum anybody could simply laugh off. It'd be a stretch even for the

greediest of loan sharks charging the most cutthroat interest rates.

*Not ones to skimp on such things*, Kirie had said of the Tanagura elites.

*The kind of price tag you'd expect to see on top-of-the-line merchandise*, Katze had pointed out, the darker implications clear.

Either way, it was loose change to Iason. But not to Riki.

"Hold me upside down and shake me, and you'd be lucky to come up with a penny."

If not money, then something else of equal value. Something that Riki could not bear to part with.

"Then I'll take your freedom in exchange."

He'd known it was coming all along. Now Iason finally played his cards and showed his true, malevolent colors. Riki couldn't pay with his body, but with the freedom he coveted. Getting Riki to hand it over had been the goal of this twisted game all along.

"If you want Guy returned unharmed, you have to come back of your own free will."

That was the only price on this product.

"Quit yanking my chain," Riki growled.

Step on his pride. Throw his conscience in the ditch. Mock every rule he lived his life by... but never make him step over that line in the sand he could not cross.

"And what guarantees do I have that you won't hurt Guy anyway?"

That first day Riki had been locked up stark naked in the cell in Eos, he'd been forced to live that way for the next month. "Pet training," it was called. His legs spread, his privates exposed, and the furniture called Daryl going down on him night and day. Exposed and abused before and after, his pride torn away, the semen wrung out of him. Everything he clung to and everything he

would not let go of was forced, driven, and sucked out of him.

And yet, as much as he didn't want that happening to Guy—

"Give me two weeks. Don't do anything. Just keep him provided for. That's not asking too much, is it?"

It was the only thing he could say, even knowing that he was bargaining with Guy's life in the process.

"I see. And you intend to force concessions out of me while holding a worthless hand?"

Riki had nothing left to bluff with, but he had no choice but to double down with what he had.

"And if I do, it's all right with you? Whatever might happen to Guy?"

Iason's gaze never wavered. The tone of his voice only grew colder, an ice pick aimed at Riki's only known weakness.

"What about you? Are you OK with letting the whole world know?" Riki could give as well as he could take. Even if it meant scraping together his very last grains of courage. He licked his dry lips and steeled his gaze. "There's no lack for the kind of dirt here that would make those Commonwealth big shots all tingly with excitement. I was under your thumb for three years. But that didn't mean I was kissing your ass every second of the day, Iason."

Unexpectedly, Iason's smile only broadened. "At last you're getting into the swing of things. Men who can bully a Blondy with that kind of bluster are few and far between. And it's an even bigger thrill for not having heard the likes of it for a full year."

The cruelty in Iason's brilliant countenance deepened to a frightening degree. Enough to make Riki momentarily regret his fighting words.

"Now that you mention it, there was someone a long time ago. Someone just like you. But I gave his face a gentle caress and he came to heel just like that. How about you?"

Riki swallowed hard despite himself. He didn't need to ask who that was.

"So what will it take to get you to humbly bend your knees before me?"

Up until now, Riki had never been required to submit willingly. His self-respect as a human being, his pride as a man had been stolen by Iason four years before. So what could he offer him now? Nothing. He had nothing left to give. Nothing other than the last bastion of who he knew himself to be. And that was something he would never surrender.

"I see. Perhaps to start things off you'd like to observe Guy being treated like you were. You slum mongrels are rather used to your male/male liaisons. Instead of a run-of-the-mill sex robot, what about a crazed, half-human, bioengineered chimera riding him? Now *that'd* be a thrill. Don't you think?"

Riki bit down on his lip. He should have known better than to try such a desperate bluff on Iason. Nevertheless—

"So what do you want, Iason? Do you even know yourself? I'm twenty years old. Too old to be kept in Eos. Isn't that common knowledge among pet owners?"

That reality couldn't go unspoken. But why would he, of all people, feel compelled to blurt out such a thing? Turning it over in his mind, his stomach churned and he felt himself becoming more pissed off.

Most of the male pets kept in Eos were younger than fifteen. And besides that, the higher an elite's rank, typically the younger the pet. Four years before, at Riki's debut in Eos, the unbridled opinion was that in terms of commodity value, he'd barely made it under the wire.

Compared to a pureblood female, the prime of a male was indeed short. A female could choose her mates, be bred, and have children. But not a male. Aside from the tiny fraction that could obtain "seed rights," common practice in Eos was to discard males by the time

they hit seventeen.

Among them, Riki lasted as Iason's pet until the age of eighteen. A rare exception. And to make matters worse, he was mated neither in public nor in the shadows. He was the sole sexual property of Iason. The pets of Eos loathed him for it.

"I'm pretty much a has-been, aren't I?" he asked with particular force. Riki no longer wore the symbol of his humiliation—the pet ring—and never would again. Not in this lifetime. "So what's the deal? After all this time, and going to such lengths, why call the lost dog home?"

No mere whimsy lasted three years. And if there was some fucking time limit at work, then why the hell let him go in the first place? *And why now?* That was what everything came down to. Even as a pet in Eos, what was going through Iason's mind? Riki didn't have a clue.

As far as he was concerned, Iason was a slave master who bound and subjugated him with chains of pleasure. There was no way he was going back to that life a second time.

"You elites have your pick of the purebloods, the queen of any harem. But three fucking years? With a slum mongrel? I'd think even you would get bored after a while."

"Which is why I let you run free for a year."

"What?"

"I removed your pet ring, called off the guards, and allowed you to roam the slums for a while. You've had enough time to catch your second wind, haven't you? My patience does have its limits."

*One year of freedom? To catch my second wind? His patience has its limits?* Riki couldn't make heads nor tails of what Iason was getting at.

*What—are—you—trying—to—say—?*

"Do not misunderstand. All I did was remove your pet ring. I have

not otherwise touched your official registration records."

In that moment Riki felt like bashing Iason's face in. His mind reeled. "You—must—be—joking—"

*It wasn't possible.* Removing the pet ring and erasing the records should be one and the same thing. There were no exceptions. There couldn't be.

"I am not joking."

"It's impossible! Quit messing with my head!"

"You want proof?"

*Yeah, if such a thing exists, I sure as hell want to see it!* He choked down the words before they exited his lips. What if Iason was telling the truth? What if he really did have the evidence? What would Riki do then? If the evidence was thrust in front of his eyes here and now?

He had no other recourse. With a snap of Iason's fingers, it was back to the life of a pet. Riki swallowed hard. *He's bluffing.* He had to be. He couldn't have gone to all this trouble.

Using Kirie—

Nabbing Guy—

Paying a finder's fee of ten thousand *kario*.

The evidence couldn't exist—Iason never would have gone to such lengths.

*And yet—why—?*

A cold shock licked down his spine as Iason extracted a passcase from his breast pocket and flipped it open and held it up in front of Riki's eyes. The unforgiving, undeniable evidence.

Riki stared at it. His eyes widened with shock. A pet license with the holy seal of Tanagura affixed.

"Yesterday, today, and of course tomorrow as well, you are my pet."

A shock like Riki had never expected in his life seized his heart. The truth weighed painfully, like a heavy stone on his chest. His vision warped and crumbled, filling with fire like the heat waves rising from a desert floor.

"Three years, Riki. I tamed and trained you for three years. That's how much time and patience the task required. Have you forgotten already? Put it all behind you?"

Riki would never forget. There was no way he could. The pet poison stained every corner of his body. During those three years of intolerable humiliation and festering pleasure, every day with Iason had woven the intoxicating curse into the marrow of his bones. The thick weight of the sludge made him want to vomit it all out—though it could never be purged from his memory.

"A pet is not simply some flashy accessory, Riki. You are mine to use as I wish for as long as I want. Whether you are twenty or forty, it makes no difference. You are that lithe and lewd slum mongrel who fawns on no one. How could you imagine I would let you go at this juncture?" Calmly and warmly Iason drove the tip of the blade home. And then smiled coldly.

Riki stood there petrified. The blood drained from his face. His lips trembled. Regardless of whatever thoughts tumbled through his mind, his benumbed mouth and tongue could not form the words.

Iason returned the passcase to his breast pocket. And in a manner suggesting it was his natural right to do so, threw his arm around Riki's waist and yanked him closer.

In that moment, Riki twisted his body and jerked his hands free and awkwardly stumbled away.

"Come here, Riki," Iason said, with all the menace of a spurned owner.

His back against the wall, Riki summoned defiance from the pit of his stomach and hurled it back at Iason. "Who the fuck am I?"



There're hundreds of bastards who want to be your pet, so why the hell settle on me?"

The scream drained the air from his lungs and the color from his face. He had no place to run. It was a scream of both desperation and necessity. But even the sharpened point of Riki's fury shattered like glass against Iason's shield.

"I so cherish these enlivening moments when you defy me even as a Blondy. When you react to me so *humanly*. I feel myself tingling right down to the center of my brain. I love how you look at me with such undisguised disdain. It's so endearing I want to rip out your beating heart and press it to my cheek."

Both repulsive and doting, Iason spun the words out of his mouth. As if they would lure his lover into his arms. Like the pitiable sacrifice in the lair of the Angel of Death, Riki could hardly even blink.

All he could feel was a numbing hallucination that seemed to rise up his body from the tips of his toes and close clumsily about his throat.

In a refined and practiced manner, Iason removed his gloves and slowly reached out his right hand. Not toward Riki's waist or arm or shoulders, but for the scruff of his neck, which he seized gently and stroked like a prized dog's.

Riki jerked and shrugged his shoulders and backed away. But Iason had already arrested any further movement. "No, no, no." he said. "Stand still."

Iason's deep and tender voice cascaded over Riki. It was enough to make Riki's heart leap in his chest. Over those three years, the sensuous touch of Iason's hands had become ingrained inside him.

Iason's fingertips traced undulating lines along his neck, grazing his earlobes. Slipping across his shoulders now, a whole year later, raised goose flesh on his skin. Stealing beneath Riki's bathrobe and fondling his chest, a stroke shooting some indescribable shudder through Riki.

In that moment, Riki tasted every drop of a thirst that had lasted a year. His pulse beat like two bass drums, one after the other. His breath burned in his throat. His heart raced faster. His nipples grew flushed and full, hardening to points. As Iason assaulted the peaks of that rigid heat as if to crush them with his fingertips, the lusts buried deep in Riki's body burst into flame.

Something was slowly seeping through his tissues, staining the flesh. That which he could not forget, no matter how hard he tried, reared its head and opened its ravenous mouth.

He was helpless before it.

Riki bit down on his lower lip and squeezed his eyes shut. He was dying of thirst, like the cracks opening up on a parched lake bed, but the smoldering wildfire had never gone out. And so the incandescent brand held Riki in its rapturous grasp. The scrupulously ingrained sexual response rippled and bloomed, like a bud of spring bursting into the sunlight.

Iason loosened the front of Riki's bathrobe and pushed it off his shoulders, letting the fabric fall into a heap on the floor. As he pulled Riki closer to massage his tight buttocks, even before pressing against his loins, Riki's member had come to attention in stark proof of his pleasure.

Riki could conceal nothing. Make no excuses. He could only grind his back teeth and hang his head.

Iason did not hesitate. As if to confirm the sensations of a year before, he redoubled his efforts, touching Riki with intensity and then gentleness, and with great attention to detail—

Iason kneaded the hot buds of Riki's taut nipples, the tense muscles of his buttocks. The curve of his rod and then the weight of his balls in his hand. His fingertips toyed with the slit of the honeyed tip until he firmly gripped Riki's rod in his palm. And then, exercising his rights as master and owner, he fitted the pet ring back into place.

*Z-107M.* The number of the brand that cursed Riki's existence.

Riki trembled when he tasted that particular sensation snug against his flesh again after so long. In the blink of an eye, without a note of fanfare, his brief flirtation with freedom had collapsed.

However, perhaps the underlying truth was that the burning sense of loss and the physical pangs of pleasure were of two different dimensions. Stimulated by the well-accustomed touch of Iason's caresses, his back arched. The flickering flames of desire licked at his nether regions.

*"Ahhh—"*

Iason squeezed his nipples hard. Riki couldn't help but gasp and moan. The fingers strummed, pressed, and twisted to one side and then the next. Manipulated until his throbbing blood bruised beneath his skin. And yet it was a vexingly lax stimulation.

But enough that the tip of his hard shaft oozed honey. When Iason grazed it with the balls of his fingers, the permeating pet poison rolled through Riki like a wave. He knew he'd be a slave to his senses until his final, gasping breath.

With his free hand, Iason kept a measured grip on Riki's package, massaging his balls, as if to confirm, from time to time, the position of one sphere or the other. Riki's shaft burned down to the tip. The precum welled up. The furrows in his brow deepened.



Iason grazed Riki's glans with the pads of his fingers, coating them

with sexual juices. Riki's gasps grew in intensity as Iason plunged his finger into the narrow valley of his muscled folds.

"Ahhh—"

Sparks shot across the back of Riki's eyes. His groin began to tremble and spasm. In the year since he'd returned to the slums, he hadn't done it with anybody. He'd jerked himself off in a perfunctory manner. The thought of these unconstrained pleasures *frightened* him.

No matter how much he desired the touch of skin—how much he hungered for its warmth—he merely went through the motions. The stimulation coursing through his starving body was stronger than anything he'd ever imagined.

"You have no perseverance, Riki." Iason's cool banter made Riki bite his lip. "Compared to your mouth, *this* is so much more honest."

Aroused by Iason's probing digits, Riki's creamy ejaculation slicked the Blondy's hand. Turning and baring and exposing the ripe rift of his hidden flesh, Riki keened and groaned, his head slumping to his chest. Were it not for the pet ring clasping the base of his member, those stimulations would have brought him to climax in a flash. Even Riki was startled by the parched condition of his sexual being.

"With this, the throbbing of your favorite spot is too much to hear."

Iason dangled the words before Riki like catnip, forcing the mongrel to realize his own masochism.

"Spread your legs."

Riki followed the command immediately, shifting his feet accordingly.

"More."

The severe tone in Iason's voice prohibited a refusal. And yet, the vibrations strumming Riki's eardrums plunged deeply, stirring him to the core. Enough to bewitch the last vestiges of Riki's self-control.

The tip of Iason's finger glided down the valley, grazing his hidden bud.

With a shiver, Riki suddenly caught his breath. Whether touched or not touched, the softness of the contact made his senses reel and his blood boil. He loathed this stripping bare of the wellspring of his pleasure centers, tuned as they were to a hypersensitive degree. Even he had not touched and toyed with himself in this way.

But now he had to acknowledge the awe and undiluted desires unleashed as the seal was broken. And yet, the line drawn by Iason's lingering finger inflamed Riki's starved state.

"Just—do—it—"

Exciting Riki's fevered, swollen flesh over and over—pushing him to the breaking point—the drumbeat stuttering through the center of his body maintaining the agony—

He desired Iason's finger, desired him to plunge deeper and divide him in two, so compelling was the lust. It bore into him, accosted him, and assaulted him. He wanted that entrancing, intoxicating bliss to take him over. But then—

"What do you want?" Iason asked.

Riki growled low, inaudible curses in response to such coldness. Nevertheless, his starving state forced him to pry open his frozen lips.

*"Don't play with me—"* he shot back, glaring at Iason from beneath his brow. His black eyes brimmed with carnality, the corners of his eyes stained red. That and the unconscious desire in his voice only added to his strangely compelling allure. "I'm telling you to hurry up and fuck me."

Riki wasn't trying to be provocative. He no longer had the vitality to deliberately act that way. The words leaping hoarsely from his throat were, after a manner, a request. A plea.

But Iason would spare him no mercy. "If that's what you want, then make your vows. Again, and clearly. Whom do you belong to?"

Riki gulped. He stared back at Iason, his eyes whirlpools of despair and the pressing demands of desire. If he did not give, he would never get what he needed. It was another chain binding him all the further, but Riki could discipline himself no longer.

"I—am—yours—I—belong—to—you—"

The stark reality trickled from the corners of his clenched teeth. This was no lie that would vanish with the morning dew. Though at best a verbal promise, Iason knew that with a certain amount of conditioning, it would have the entrancing power to bind. Because the pet ring by itself was not enough to hold Riki. That was why it was necessary for Riki to swear upon his body and his soul with his own words.

"Yes, you do. That will suffice."

Iason leisurely parted Riki's hidden bud. His finger turned and twisted and buried itself inside, like a nail driven through the heart of Riki's pride. Iason moved his finger deeper, harder, assaulting Riki's soft inner walls.

Riki cried and groaned.

"Ahhh—Hnnn—"

Incandescent moans erupted from his mouth in unrestrained succession. Seeking some support as his body imploded with the pleasure, half-unconsciously he rocked his hips and dug his fingers into Iason's back.

Riki thirsted. He hungered. In the depths of his parched body was a place that could not forget the tremors licking up his spine. Permeating him bit by bit. A stinging heat scorching his blood.

Riki held his breath and waited. For the moment of blistering fire and numbing ice when the tightly strung strings of his bliss snapped

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"Hahhh—"

His eyebrows furrowed, his back arched, the sobs pulsating at his

throat, his semen gushing out of him—what was he in that moment? What regrets did he harbor for his fleeting freedom? Or his own contempt at his fate? Or the masochism that forced him to kneel before absolute power?

His body took up the pet poison like a sponge. He should have possessed some natural resistance, a point of self-immunization. However, the culmination of that empty year left him with nothing but a body that could be toyed with, provoked, stimulated into these uncontrollable spasms of sensuality.

The harsh and biting reality hit him hard.

He'd struggled day after day to erase the memories of what had been crammed into his mind and instructed to his senses. Had he, in direct opposition to his efforts, engendered all this hunger and thirst instead?

Iason's finger, swallowed down to its joints, twitched and wormed its way inside him. That alone tightened the tendons of his inner thighs until they hummed. His hot arousal stoked his pulse, tightening around his groin like a vise, Sending whirlpools of narcotic numbness swirling into his brain.

He was living through an old dream, his body falling into a well-remembered rhythm as Iason's finger kneaded his feverish, ripe flesh, grazing the walls of his insides, rending him apart. The place of pleasure was etched into his memories, and his desires traced that line back to the precise location of the rapture. *Heat and pain and fire*. Tossed and turned by the undulations of bliss, his feelings were swept into the void.

And yet, as if to prove that his basic instincts, coveting more pleasure, knew no limits, he clamped tightly around Iason's finger, drawing it in deeper. The bonfire had been lit, and it would not be easily extinguished. He couldn't help but expose this humiliating awareness of his masochistic desires to Iason. Doing so only added fuel to the fire.

"A finger alone is not enough?"



"Put—it—in—me—" he said, knowing that if he didn't ask, it would not be given.

"It's—not—enough—"

So he had to say it.

His body was bent over. Accompanied by an overwhelming sense of size and mass, Iason entered him from the rear, stroking the inner walls of his flesh, swollen with a hard, fierce fervor. Filled by that which he desired, Riki was assaulted simultaneously by intense feelings of relief and waves of lust and lasciviousness. Riki threw his head back, cries of joy spilling from his throat.

Iason took his time, breaking him in slowly, and then burying himself to the hilt. Pleasure spasmed through Riki's body as Iason rocked him back and forth. Massaging his inner parts, ascertaining the wellspring of his ecstasy. Riki's cries rose shrilly, as if his lungs were being turned inside out.

As if to engrave the new contract into Riki's soul, Iason drove into him, penetrating deep until Riki's back bent like a bow. He gripped Riki's waist and thrust his hips forward. Riki clasped his hands against the wall and gasped.

With every thrust, Iason's rock-hard appendage plunged deeper and deeper. Riki's spine creaked like a hinge and the repeated shocks blasted into the corners of his skull. He felt himself suffocating, his rapturous cries frozen in the air.

Riki's member, swollen to an arc, scattered drops of bliss about his feet. Reaching the pinnacle of his arousal, he climbed ever higher. He climbed higher and could not find release, with every stop retreating further from him. The pleasure turned to stinging pain.

"I've—got—nothing—left—mercy—please—"

The tears poured down into his twisted and trembling mouth. Simply standing erect was torture. Each breath was like a rasp in his throat. His midsection felt on the verge of breaking in two. His legs turned to rubber and were seized by cramps and convulsions.

The point came when too much pleasure turned inexorably to pain, when heaven became hell. The numbed center of his brain felt like a lead ball in his head. His eyes blurred and couldn't pull into focus.

Finally, Iason eased their bodies apart, cleanly separating the connection between them. In that instant, Riki collapsed to the floor in a boneless, panting heap.

The murky, muddled atmosphere in the room showed no signs of stirring. The scent from Riki's seed scattered across the wall and floor collected and stagnated there.

Riki couldn't recall how many times he had climaxed. He only remembered Iason whispering in his ear how he'd wring Riki dry until he had nothing left to give. There wasn't a drop of semen left in his body.

His unkempt black bangs were plastered against his forehead. He'd already lost any sensation below his waist. He crouched there, each breath burning at his throat, and looked vacantly up at Iason.

"You'll have Guy back by tomorrow," Iason said coldly as he straightened himself up. "So make the best of your goodbyes." He walked away without a backward glance. And then stopped, his hand on the doorknob. "I shouldn't have to say so, but when you return to Eos, be sure to leave the grime of the slums behind you. You wouldn't want to leave any loose ends lying around that might trip somebody up. Would you, Riki?"

With that warning lingering in the air, Iason exited Riki's apartment.

The freezing, vacant, midnight streets of Colony Block 24. The pedestrian traffic had petered out. Hardly a sign or porch light glowed anywhere. No watchful eyes to take notice of Iason. There was only the rhythmic stride of his boots echoing through the cold night air before it was absorbed and swallowed up by the darkness.

Slipping through the tangle of streets and alleyways without a

moment's confusion, Iason's sure-footed steps brought him to King's Road. As if waiting in the shadows for him to arrive, an air car appeared, gliding up and stopping next to him. The door opened without a sound. Iason slid his lanky form into the car and settled into the back seat.

"Parthia," was all he said.

"Understood," Katze said, his eyes fixed ahead with an expressionless gaze as he quickly accelerated.

Iason leaned back, surrendering to the cushioned seat with only the slightest tremor. His mind flashed back to the Riki he had just parted from.

*As defiant as the first time we met.*

Riki's countenance was an unbridled display of alarm and wariness. When Iason pondered that, a wry smile rose unbidden to his lips. He couldn't help but think fondly of Riki, the way he clung stubbornly to his freedom with all his might, not realizing it was nothing but an illusion.

This attachment was something more than possessiveness. Hadn't he measured out a year's time and put that distance between himself and Riki in order to know exactly where he stood? Such was the extent of his desire for Riki.

The startling rigidity in Riki's extremities and the pulsating heat in his body still lingered in his hands. As if deliberating on those echoes and reverberations, Iason slowly and tightly clasped his hands together.

*After this, I shall never let him go.* He'd set out to apprehend and had been apprehended instead. This knowledge was closer to an inner awakening or resignation to the truth, rather than a personal condemnation.

As Raoul put it, "How could an elite such as Iason Mink lose his way over a bit of slum trash?"

The bitter sarcasm hit home. But Iason let it wash over him with a

single thin smile. Even when it came to his whimsies, Iason was determined to the end. His loyalty to Jupiter, the creator of Tanagura, did not waver in the slightest.

Except that his absolute devotion was a bit diluted because of Riki.

*Why?* he asked himself. But Iason himself had no answer. He'd never experienced anything like this before. If forced to provide a reason, he felt he had stumbled across something he could not do without. That seemed the closest truth he could come to.

*Something important, that he could not stand to lose.*

But it wasn't that, either.

*Something he didn't just long for, but must possess, even if that meant grabbing and binding it fast.*

That was more it. Something akin to an *attachment*.

So as far as Iason was concerned, there was no need to engage in an inner debate. He'd take Riki back and lower the curtain on the little farce he'd scripted to get the job done.

To be sure, his sense of the quixotic had gotten out of hand, and the whole thing might not have been in the best of tastes. But the ends justified the means. Making Riki pant and sing, the breath tumble ragged from his throat, had been easier than he'd remembered.

*The boy was in a half-starved state, after all.*

That had been an unexpected revelation. Five years before, provoked by Riki, he had taken him for the hell of it.

Or, perhaps, the real problem had arisen before that.

*Sex is no big deal. Simply a convenient substitute for jacking off.* So Riki had once asserted, and in a sense he was the truly naïve one. Among the slum mongrels, whose sexual mores were said to hit rock bottom, that naïveté was quite rare.

As if sex was a been-there-done-that affair for him, he didn't know

the true meaning of pleasure. That might be a better way to put it. Not an amateur, yet no master, either. Even knowing where the bud of his pleasure lived, he pretended indifference.

Riki had been a hard-nosed brat when Iason first met him. Too much of a brat to make Iason want to pick him up and play with him. But when he learned that Riki was renowned in the slums as a frenetic gang boss, that strange and unexpected naïveté did not strike him as the kind of preening haughtiness that would so clumsily sell itself short.

And that was indeed not the case. Seeing Guy—Riki's pairing partner—with his own two eyes, Iason at last understood that somewhere under the mask of Riki's uncompromising pride must be buried the roots of his innocence. Namely, a body that had come to be loved and prized by a single man. The confirmation of what he never would have presumed. *So this is Guy—*

Even becoming aware that he'd been set up and sold off by Kirie, Guy didn't throw a tantrum. The man who was Riki's partner was more collected, but it bordered on the disagreeable.

Hearing the extravagant sums Kirie had received, Guy had gaped at Iason and said with a wry smile, "He's overcharging you, you know?"

Even all that talk of becoming a pet that Kirie had swallowed whole with jealousy and envy only made Guy quip, "There's nothing desirable about me. No diamond in the rough here—just gravel no Bloody would ever take to."

He'd turned Iason down flat. And on top of that had added, "So you must have other motives in mind if it really had to be me."

The man could think on his feet. And yet didn't possess the deviousness of mind to imagine he'd been used as the lure to hook Riki. But when he found out—after so easily reading Kirie's double-cross with a thin smile—how would he react then?

Iason would be lying if he said he wasn't curious. *Call it another one of my whimsical moments.* A slight smile turned the corners of his

mouth.

Iason had stolen Riki from a man like Guy four years before and made him his pet. He'd torn every ounce of bliss from his green body, planted in it a garden of pleasures, and trained him to be a pet that knew every carnal secret. He beat him into obedience but certainly not into docility.

No matter how Riki protested and denied reality, he had a body hypersensitive to pleasure that bloomed at the slightest lascivious touch. Simply trailing a finger down the back of Riki's neck made his nipples erect. And when Iason pressed and manipulated the rigid heat contained therein, Riki's cock would instantly swell and harden.

It was mortifying to Riki, but of great satisfaction to Iason. Despite that one year gap, Riki's body had not forgotten the amorous touch of Iason's hands. He had conducted a fine performance.

Nevertheless, Riki's hidden bud had been tighter than expected, and had resisted Iason's finger. During that year, Riki had apparently not indulged himself in one drunken orgy after the other.

*"Him and Guy are over."*

Iason had taken Kirie's pronouncement with the necessary grain of salt. But the reality of the hypersensitivity he expected and found inside Riki, accompanied by that unexpected stiffness, aroused in him a fresh sense of surprise.

Given time, he would carefully loosen those chains. Before that, though, it would be Riki letting loose. When Riki's lips trembled and he begged to be fucked, Iason couldn't help thinking that the previous year had not gone to waste. Iason had given himself this year to ascertain the exact nature of his attachment. He didn't harbor the illusion that he'd done so in order to induce this famine in Riki's body.

"A pet's life isn't worth shit," Riki had hissed in his face a year ago, grimacing at the pain of the pet ring grinding into his groin. "I'm nobody's bitch!" he'd managed to blurt out in the gaps between the

pleasure and pain.

But then he'd said. "I belong to you."

The black eyes stared back at him, brimming with physical desire, and those were the words that had emerged. A total defeat, Iason was sure. That conviction sent his own passions over the top.

And those definitely were his own passions. The flawless product of reason and intelligence, a Blondy should never be possessed by anything so degrading as these animalistic lusts.

And yet Iason lusted. For Riki. All his logic and self-control smashed to nothing. Before Riki's very eyes, a Blondy had degraded into a mere sex android. Had he sunk so far?

He could acknowledge to himself the masochistic contempt, but still could not surmount the wonder of it all. There was no way that Raoul—this latest round only fueling his bitter castigations—would understand where he was coming from. That he, Iason, had succumbed.

But Iason knew. Even penetrating Riki as often as he liked, he could not obtain that transcendent sense of satisfaction. Flesh and blood and the android. That insurmountable wall was itself not the source of his suffering. He felt it when the two of them became one—a rough and grating thirst in a deep corner of his heart.

Iason could control the physical body, but Riki's soul remained out of reach. Iason had never imagined that this would have weighed upon him as heavily and painfully as it did.

If he could only convert what he was feeling into words, perhaps something would arise that would bind the two together. The only other option was to torture Riki, turn him inside out and fill him up, until they became one.

Iason curled his lips in his self-contempt at being carried away by such fanciful daydreams. At this point in the game, nothing had changed at all. All that kept Riki fast at his heels was the pet ring. That was the rock-solid reality in front of his eyes. Canter off on a

sudden tangent, and he might never find his way back again. There was no going back to the past to change the path he'd chosen.

There was no option but for Iason to reign over Riki from above as his absolute master. Yet, now and then, a chafing sense of irritation and frustration welled up inside him. As if besmeared by such muddled desires, his body itself began to rot. He began having bad dreams. Or not dreams at all, but omens, storm clouds gathering on the horizon.

Out of sheer hopelessness and inexperience, the feared Ice Man of the black market could not calmly cast away his tumultuous heart without a moment's hesitation.

The fresh, raw attachment drawing him to Riki and his wool pride as a Blondy battled and blended and tangled together. And before long, the borderline between them was ground into the mud and no longer visible. Iason did not perceive this as corruption. But branding it a heresy from the perspective of his creator, Jupiter, could change nothing at this point.

In the final analysis, Iason thought, only the bent chains of master and pet tied them together. *Riki and myself—*

This one thought on his mind, Iason permitted himself a deep and private sigh.



## Chapter 3

That day, the skies over Ceres were taut and cold. The chill air from the night before hung frozen in place. Everything was still. Nothing moved. As if the softest touch would shatter all that translucent clarity.

The dim sun hung heavily in the heavens, staining the colony in sepia tones, the shadows reaching out all the more fleeting and ephemeral. Only the slumbering silence languidly marked the time.

It was around noon when Guy came back to the slums. He'd been away for almost two weeks. As he walked home, the hushed, cold air finally clouded over, and the bare asphalt began to look familiar to him again. But the reality was, Guy had no idea what was going on. Though it was a little late to worry about that now.

That morning in his pristine cell, he'd been eating a late breakfast when the videophone suddenly rang for the first time ever.

*What the hell—?* He hesitated, then hit the button.

Iason's face appeared on the screen, a face he'd hardly had time to get used to, but a face whose overbearing manner alone seemed an imposition on the rest of the world.

"Go back to the slums. It's all the same to me."

There was no explanation behind the call, so Guy was completely bewildered. His reaction was unexpected, or Iason found his thickheaded silence amusing, because Iason then added, "What's this? Have you grown attached to your comfortable life in confinement? If so, I don't mind you sticking around as long as you wish." He smiled out of the corners of his mouth.

But Guy wasn't about to let the opportunity slide. "That—that's OK. Yeah, I'd better be going."

Because a comfortable life of house arrest was not a comfortable life at all. Iason sure as hell knew that. But Guy also knew when he wasn't being jerked around. It wasn't a matter of Iason's manners.

It's the man who knows he hasn't won who picks the fight he's sure to lose. Guy wasn't about to waste his energy. He didn't understand why, but he knew that this farce had played itself out; he let out a deep sigh of relief.

Guy would be hard-pressed to call his dirty little hovel in the slums a pleasure. Yet while everything about his imprisoned existence had been as different as night to day, it had proved boring as hell.

The purposeless days had grown unimaginably long. Every captive day—incapable of even stepping outside that room—his body and mind dulled further. What kept the compounding stress and sense of desperation at bay was knowing that while his exact role was being kept a complete mystery, someone had paid an outrageous ten thousand *kario* to watch everything play out. Not even a Tanagura elite threw that kind of money down the sewer on a whim.

*You sure managed to marry into money*, Kirie had darkly jested through clenched teeth. Kirie thought this was all about becoming a pet. Guy hadn't bought into it from the start. He wasn't badmouthing himself on that account. There was simply no way he was worth that much money.

Something else was afoot. And knowing that gave Guy the fortitude to put up with his imprisonment. As house arrests went, he couldn't complain about the service. As long as he was behind bars, nothing was going to happen. For the time being, the pressing realities of the world could bide their time.

It was better to stay calm and wait for the right moment. That was the best course of action. He couldn't be certain when the right moment would arrive, but it was clear that no good would come from him digging in his heels and presenting a defiant front to this aristocratic Blondy. More than being in a different class from himself, he was an entire species apart.

And yet, Guy had been released far more quickly than he'd

expected. His enormous relief on the one hand was joined on the other by the suspicion that he'd been played for a fool in some unscrupulous game. As if a building tension had suddenly snapped, leaving him with the uneasy feeling—*is it really over?*

The play ended and the curtain came down too soon. Now Guy was left only to wonder what the last two weeks of his life had meant. Something, somehow had happened to bring things to a close, and Guy had no way of knowing what—

Except that the ten thousand Kirie had taken from Iason had somehow paid off. Or Guy had been set free because something of equal value had come into Iason's possession. Considered in that light, Guy couldn't help but sense that something was going on. Putting all that aside, when permission was granted for him to go, Guy left quickly and without any further complaints.

Just as when Kirie brought him there under false pretenses, after being released from his cell, Guy found an air car limo waiting for him outside the lobby of the skyscraper. It looked as if Iason had dispatched it there. He'd said he'd arrange for the return trip. Guy figured he was owed some compensation for the last two weeks of mental distress and accepted it.

This wasn't one of those automatic capsule car air taxis—this was a chauffeur-driven limousine. The unblemished silver-gray finish was polished to a shine that made Guy squint. *There's no explaining how a Blondy values his money.*

The sight and substance of a Bloody was beyond high class. They were simply incapable of "slumming." Not to mention that the way they spoke and behaved put them beyond Guy's capability to categorize.

To his fellow slum mongrels, if this wasn't all some kind of cynical Tanagura elite humor, then it could only be construed as a lot of pointless politeness.

Still, when it came to getting a free ride all the way to the slums, he wasn't going to turn it down.

Remaining true to his professional code, the driver showed him no unnecessary courtesies, made no clumsy attempts to pry, and with a sufficiently feigned sense of discretion, let Guy out a block or two from Ceres and quickly sped away.

*Hey, honey, I'm home all safe and sound—aren't I—?*

Guy felt a sense of relief, seeing the well-accustomed and dilapidated scene before his eyes. At this point, he no longer felt the shock and anger at being betrayed by Kirie. He just wasn't feeling so forgiving that he would concern himself with a guy who thought selling out a friend for money was all in a day's work.

Guy was absent for half a month. And yet, after just two weeks, the old and familiar smell of the slums struck Guy with a strangely sentimental force. His feet took him directly to Riki's place. Despite having just arrived home, he wanted to see Riki's face more than his own wretched dive.

*What sort of excuse am I going to give?*

Guy hadn't stood Riki up on a date, since they didn't enjoy that kind of relationship any longer. However, Riki must have worried when Guy vanished without a word to anybody. Guy didn't doubt it in the least.

Guy stood at Riki's door and punched the intercom button. Nobody answered. Nobody challenged his presence. The door eased open with a familiar hiss and rhythm.

And Riki's eyes met his.

"Yo," Guy said, after a beat, with a somewhat clumsy and abashed expression clouding his face.

Riki nodded, a faint smile rising to his lips.

"Can I come in?"

"When did you suddenly get so polite?" Riki asked. There was a faint hoarseness in his voice as he welcomed Guy in.

*He has a point there.* Guy smiled wryly to himself as he walked into Riki's apartment. But he couldn't help noticing how worn down Riki looked. He casually drew his eyebrows together. "You know, Riki—"

"What's that?"

"I didn't wake you up, did I?"

"Why do you say that?"

"Seems like you've got a frog in your throat. Thought I might have woken you up in the middle of a nap."

Riki's eyes opened a little wider. "You're imagining things." He averted his gaze.

Guy's attention suddenly focused on the back of Riki's neck, intent on a trail of small bruises. He suddenly froze where he stood. *He's got—hickies—?*

"What's with you'? Take a load off."

"Oh, yeah, sure," Guy said, his voice climbing unnaturally despite himself.

*With who?* Guy's pulse quickened at the thought. Almost by reflex, his eyes shot over to the bed. But he saw no evidence of anything to give him cause for concern. But just because there wasn't anything *there* didn't make what he *had* seen disappear in a puff of smoke. The painful pounding of his heart did not diminish.



*Where did it happen and who was he with?*

At a stroke, his buoyant mood on the way there crashed. They hadn't shared a bed since the time Riki had returned to the slums. But before that, they'd ended up in each other's arms almost daily.

Their physical partnership had withered away bit by bit. But if Riki wanted it, Guy would have gladly leapt back into the saddle at any point along the way.

But Riki had never made any sort of invitation. Not even a suggestive glance. And when Guy hinted at the subject, it was Riki who danced away.

In fact, as far as Guy knew, Riki hadn't done it with anybody that entire year. With seeming indifference, Riki had turned himself into an unattractive presence.

But though he was denigrated as a beaten dog, it didn't mean he'd lost the interest of those around him. Far from it, everybody wanted to peer into the black hole of those three lost years, a mystery that made Riki all the more alluring.

There was something about his stoicism that made him even more beautiful. People had been saying that about him all along. But before, it was his uncompromising sense of presence that eclipsed his looks. The fearlessness that emerged in the transition from child to adult.

It was still there, of course. Though in Riki's case there was a particular luster about him that the age alone could not account for. Some mask had been ripped away. Maybe that was the best way to put it. Which meant that someone must have removed it. And who that someone might be was the question on everybody's mind.

Even when it came to the passing whispers and trash-talking among themselves, like a dash of seasoning, Riki made every conversation that much better. That was what it felt like.

Mesmerized and bewitched by Riki's unconscious charms, Guy knew that no small number of opponents had met an ignominious defeat stumbling over their own two feet. Naturally Riki had not once addressed these matters himself.

These were the kinds of things that somehow reached Guy's ears almost immediately. Though it wasn't as if he was going around begging for information.

The survival of the fittest was the wisdom of the slums. And loose moral behavior was no exception to the rule. The prize didn't so much go to those who struck first, as it was taken from those who revealed the chinks in their armor.

That was why, for any number of reasons, the youngsters who'd just been released from Guardian sought protection, cozied up to the strong, and if that didn't work out, attached themselves to any gang at all, large or small.

Sex as well was a give and take proposition. Though pleasures were everywhere for the taking, a man looking out for his own welfare could only trust so much. It was far better to put up with the "safe sex" of his own group than being used up and thrown away by some passing stranger.

That was common sense in the slums.

But even by that yardstick, it was said the old Bison played by its own rules. Riki and Guy flouted that common sense, sought nobody's protection, and quickly created Bison out of nothing. Its small and selective membership, recruited from the very best, gave no quarter to the vultures who'd settle for easy pickings.

Unlike the other gangs, they didn't let themselves get tied down by all the rules. When they crushed an opponent, the devastation was thorough. They lit up the slums with their fireworks, but never wasted a drop of sweat in the process.

And because the top dog and his lieutenant were pairing partners, the sexual hijinks among the members never got out of hand. Though the bottom line was that no one was to be tied down by anybody else and nobody would be under another's thumb.

The rules were the rules and everybody was free to govern himself. Which sounded high and mighty enough when talking about a hand-picked elite. But what it came down to was: *If you haven't got*



*the guts to pick up your own mess, they don't need you.*

From that point onward, "Riki of Bison" was the top dog. Guy at his side didn't dim his charisma in the slightest. Even that three-year gap—which resulted in him being called a "beaten dog"—barely affected his popularity.

What had changed all the more reflected the frustrated obsessions of those around Riki, the man who continued on as a legend in the slums.

Guys like Luke called Riki out by name. With every hope of winning, they challenged him to sex games like gigolo and got shot down. Though in Luke's case, more than being intoxicated by Riki's charms, it probably arose out of his frustration with Riki being labeled a beaten dog and doing nothing to clear his name. Luke just wanted to nail Riki real hard once and get it out of his system. Bolstering that theory was the fact that ever since that business with Jeeks, Luke had done nothing outrageous to provoke Riki.

When Guy considered the evidence in that light, it seemed that Riki might have lost the ability to enjoy casual sex.

In any case, with every move Riki made under such close scrutiny, if he'd spent a night with anybody anywhere, the word would have gotten around in no time. Guy had to believe that Riki wasn't about to stumble into any half-assed tryst.

That apparently wasn't the case. Riki had found himself a lover without even Guy finding out about it. The evidence there in front of his face rattled Guy in ways he was not accustomed to.

It wasn't as if Guy had remained faithful to Riki during those three missing years. He hadn't settled down with one person, but he hadn't done without the convenience of sex friends. And yet, he'd reassured himself that Riki didn't sleep with just anybody.

This revelation bordered on the unbearable. For the first time, Guy began to regret so casually entering Riki's apartment without all his senses on high alert. This was entirely different from when Kirie had fed him that line and he'd come to regret swallowing the hook.

A deep, numbing pain gathered in the pit of his stomach.

If only Riki had given him a playful jab and said, "So, which one of your fuck buddies were you holed up with for the past two weeks?" All the painful consternation and regret would have quickly unraveled.

But the guilt Riki harbored toward Guy and the throbbing evidence of Iason's fierce lovemaking only hardened his features further. A heavy, opaque gloom pressed down on both of their shoulders. Just two weeks. There were mountains of things they both wanted to talk to each other about. But for some reason, the words wouldn't come.

It was as if that accursed gap in time—during which the bonds between them had strained and snapped—had abruptly gelled into concrete.

## Chapter 4

At that moment, Katze was in the Chalaza, the underground network that tied Midas's subterranean shelters together. The emergency evacuation tunnels were not marked on any tourist's map. In fact, they were unknown to the bulk of the civilian population.

Katze sped through the tunnels in a whisper-silent, smooth-as-glass, private capsule subway car. This access way was the only connection linking the eternally hostile states of Midas and Ceres together. It symbolized as well the shadowy existence of a man like Katze and his status as a black market broker.

The dark corridors were cold and still, The only life was the pulsing orange beacons every fifty meters that slashed down at the capsule car and swallowed it up. The sudden cessation of those lights signaled arrival at the designated location, and the car came to a silent stop.

With a faint moan, the doors of the tunnel closed behind the car. A set of small red lights on either side blinked on and off and the craft turned around as if riding on a cushion of air. The lights finally turned off.

Without a pause, the gravity belts released with a soft click. The capsule car rose upward and then again came to a silent halt.

Katze sat there, eyes closed, until the moment the massive black door in front of him opened. Other than physically climbing into the car and indicating a destination, a computer-controlled capsule car imposed no other burdens on the rider. But the expression on Katze's face was anything but serene. This was not his much-boasted, imperturbable poker face.

There was nobody else around, but that didn't mean he could let down his guard. His feet dragged noticeably as he exited the car, clearly revealing his reluctance. Or something more than reluctance. It seemed that every breath was laden with repugnance.

This wasn't the old Katze at all. If any of his subordinates had accompanied him there, such an unimaginably dark and melancholy face would have struck them dumb with surprise.

In terms of his physical location, Katze was now standing at the western edge of Ceres. And beyond the massive steel doors lay the foster center, Guardian.

Katze took a deep breath and inserted his ID card into the security console and punched in his password. His fingers effortlessly recalled the fifteen-digit code, evidence of how often he'd visited the place. He didn't really want to be there, but he had no choice. Business was business.

The door opened heavily. Katze walked forward, his eyes fixed ahead. He braced himself internally to keep the tight and expressionless poker face from slipping, his nerves straining beneath the surface to maintain that placid front.

Visiting old haunts didn't affect him at all. Although it would have been better if he could bring himself to say so aloud.

Even walking down these buried, clandestine passageways, cut off from the outside world, Katze could well picture children playing and cavorting in the courtyard, now the same as then.

The high, cheerful laughter that was the province of the young—the fierce shouts of anger—the voices in tears—

Though the memories had faded over the years, in a flash, the sweet ache of the wounds came back to life in ways words could not express.

*Useless sentimentality.* The pain quietly welled up in his chest. And that sentimentality would take on quite a different spin if the children lived out their lives as furniture in Eos.

Katze himself didn't consider that a blessing in the slightest. It was simply that any place would seem better than this. And so when the man finally met his maker, his memories of Guardian would undoubtedly be tinged with the sweetest kind of endless despair.

Every citizen of Ceres grew up there until he turned thirteen and was delegated to the slums. All of them having spent the same childhood there, the foster center took on the eternal aura of holy ground.

However, as a leader in the black market, with a thorough knowledge of the sunny side and underside of Tanagura, Katze was not about to drown himself in these deep pools of sentimentality.

There was no eternal holy ground, no salvation in the slums, no matter how the dice were rolled. That was why there was the landfill called Ceres in the middle of Midas. Because Katze knew what lay beneath the innocent cries and frolicking sounds of the children. The true appearance of the holy ground that was Guardian.

The shock of first discovering the truth had gone beyond his ability to grasp. A shock greater than when the joy of being selected to be furniture in Eos changed to hopelessness as the realization sank in.

The reality of being made furniture was brought home when that recently awakened part of their bodies was removed and they ceased to be men. None of them had done anything more with it up to that point than jerk off, so the true meaning—the taste and flavor—of pleasure was still a mystery. So its absence, while missed, did not present itself as an insurmountable tragedy.

There was no going back, so the only choice was to look forward. In that frame of mind, it was quickly put behind them. However, when the truth about Guardian circled and descended and finally made contact, Katze's whole identity was shaken to the core.

The anger and pain and disgust. He still carried the distinct memory of gritting his teeth against the uncontainable fury. Turning away from the sickening, stomach-churning reality over and over again.

Such clueless happiness. If he'd only chosen to stay in the dark, days of peace and tranquility would have been his. Even if the remainder of those tranquil days were spent in a landfill.

But even now, the misfortune of knowing could not be ripped from

his mind.

And yet knowing that, there he was.

Guardian was the only so-called garden in Ceres. In its true form, it was a giant experimental organ farm under the direct control of Tanagura.

The number of blessed children whom women bore were limited in number for population control. The accursed law of Ceres said, "You don't have to kill what you never let live in the first place."

Ceres existed so that the people of Midas could feel better about themselves by directing all their personal revulsion somewhere else. And all the more so as a standing example of the private horrors that awaited themselves as well.

A great number of these unlucky lives were secretly brought forth from broth-filled caldrons that could hardly be called artificial wombs. Born in gray, frigid laboratories, given no names or even recognition of their own existence, they were consigned to their graves in the dark.

For what purpose?

For the advancement of science. For the satisfaction of intellectual curiosity about the mysteries of life. And for the profit of underground businesses whose trade could never be brought into the light.

Even now Katze felt the bile rising in his throat as the labored, searing breaths penetrating the walls—

No. It was only his mind playing cruel tricks on him. But every time he went there, Katze felt his skin crawl. He could see nothing, but felt everything. Hear nothing, but sense those echoes. Touch nothing, but grasp everything.

Katze possessed no extrasensory powers. Nevertheless, from the moment he grasped the shape and form of the truth, he could not help but sense something haunting the halls of Guardian.

However it might trouble him, he knew he was powerless to stop it. But he'd never get accustomed to that feeling creeping and crawling through his skull. A constricting phantom pain gripped the symbol of his manliness that he'd lost so long ago. A cold thing he couldn't quite grasp snaked down his spine.

Katze shivered.

There was still time until his appointment. He clicked his tongue in irritation. He sat down and sank back against the cushions of the sofa. The irritation that came from waiting alone in the lifeless, dreary room was quite unlike him. The inside of his mouth felt like sandpaper, and he was dying for a smoke.

Katze took out a cigarette, lit it, and drew the smoke deeply into his lungs. Let it simmer there, soak into the blood. And then slowly and calmly let it out. The highly scented Shelagh brand Amka cigarettes—spiked with just a touch of meth—were the one thing that always calmed his mind and soul. He knew it was a bad habit, but couldn't quit. It straddled the borderline between sanity and delusion.

He smoked perhaps to escape the lingering mirage that was Guardian. Or perhaps those illusions had such a grip on his senses *because* he smoked. By this point he really couldn't tell which.

Half of the slender cigarette had disappeared into purple smoke when a knock came at the door. Only those in the upper echelons of Guardian knew Katze was there, at this hour.

Katze snubbed out the cigarette and once again donned his poker face. The door opened and two men entered the room. The tall, middle-aged man with the moustache was Judd Kuger, the current head of the clan that had ruled Guardian for generations. He could be called the king of the mountain that was Ceres. And, of course, the faithful servant of Tanagura.

The other man was much younger. He wasn't exactly a youth, but definitely younger than Katze. The first time they had met, Katze had grasped immediately that the youth was Kuger's son. Take away the sharp, intense look in his eyes and those chiseled features belonged to Judd.

*But of course. A man's DNA is not a thing to be trifled with.*

In the slums, with its small, fixed number of females and the abundance of homosexual relationships, sex was seen as a tool of pleasure and not an act of reproduction. The very idea of leaving progeny behind was the stuff of dreams and fantasies.

Here was a singular exception: Manon Sol Kuger. He'd never set foot outside the Guardian greenhouse, and in a sense, was the pure and unsoiled child of the little terrarium.

Untouched by the dirt and grime of the slums, his slender frame radiated a sense of cleanliness that caught the eye. But nothing more. While his sense of pride was obvious at a glance, something about his presence struck Katze as obviously lacking.

To Katze's eyes, familiar as he was with the traits and peculiarities of the men of action he encountered in the markets, there was no getting around the pallid image the young man projected.

Though maybe that was because when compared to Riki, who was about the same age, Manon looked like a frail, ornamental flower stored under a bell jar. Katze knew perfectly well that there was no sense comparing the two, but no other representational standard came to his mind as a suitable match.

The two men walked up to the sofa. "Thanks for waiting," Judd said with a perfunctory bow. A step behind him, offering not even a nod, Manon only stared at Katze sullenly. The last time they'd met, Katze got the feeling he was too uptight to say hello.

This time was different. The eyes looking back at Katze were clearly filled with repugnance and scorn. From that alone, he knew that Manon had learned all the details of Katze's previous life.

*I can't believe Kuger told him—*

Having grown up in Guardian, Katze understood how intense the imprinting was, and its effects on the minds of the chosen people confined to it.

*I guess when you spend your whole life soaking in a warm bathtub, the*



*tongue gets loose and the spine goes soggy after a while.*

That alone would be reason enough for no small number in the clan to keep their distance from Katze. Even now, after all this time—

*I'm up shit creek if what passes for common sense in Guardian starts making sense elsewhere.*

To be precise, the common sense of the blood relatives who rose to the head of the Kuger clan.

In Ceres, very few boasted both a first and last name. Under the pretext of preserving a lineage, taking a wife and having a family was permitted, but only by a special and privileged class.

Even so, this only made them the biggest mongrel fish in a very small mongrel pond. Though now and then they all got the entirely wrong idea about where they actually stood in the world. They had forgotten they were Guardian's public servants and got it into their heads they were Guardian's dictators. And when this misapprehension was pointed out by others, they hissed and snarled and breathed fire.

Katze may have started out life as a clueless kid who knew nothing of how the world really worked, but he had risen to his position in the ruthless black market according to his own abilities. As far as he was concerned, a kid who'd won life's lottery because of his genes and not his own hard work wasn't worth the trash in the gutter. He wasn't about to address as equals those who had no interest in knowing the difference.

As things stood now, five clans enjoyed the privilege of keeping their last names. Of course, the privileges of lineage could cause no end of trouble if allowed to go on unabated, so their numbers were strictly regulated.

Among them, the Kuger clan, the watchers of Guardian, possessed the longest pedigree. However, such slavish devotion to the bloodline would inevitably become the weakest link for all the clans.

Tanagura was there to take advantage. The clans could stick to their principles while breaking faith with Tanagura's plans and programs, or throw them away and accept what Tanagura had to offer. Those were the choices the clans had. So there was no way they were going to unilaterally side with the victims.

The back-channel support from the Commonwealth—that had continued since the time Ceres declared independence—had dried up. Doors were shut wherever the clans turned. And then the communiqués from Tanagura arrived on their doorsteps, sounding them out behind the scenes.

When push came to shove, they feared the loss of power even more than the withering of their bloodlines. Tanagura dangled a glittering lute in front of their noses, tickling the greed at the heart of the human animal, intoxicating their sense and reason. Those who felt themselves privileged above the rest were especially susceptible.

As a result, Ceres became Tanagura's lap dog. It wasn't as if the five families suffered no pangs of conscience. But this was something they could never go public about.

However imperfect, only Tanagura's generous under-the-table support kept Ceres from ending up as bleached bones in a shallow grave. They were acting in the name of a just cause. A greater end that obscured the smaller, sinful means.

*Everybody does it*, they said, and that was enough for them. But the citizens of Ceres were never allowed to decide whether it truly was a necessary evil or not.

Ceres was in Midas. But it was not Midas. Ceres had no industry, no unique skills it could trade. Something must be found that made the continued existence of Ceres worthwhile. That something was Guardian and its organ farm.

Once they had partaken of the forbidden fruit, there was no path left but down. Knowing their limbs had grown gangrenous, they could only avert their eyes from the truth. In time the pain lessened, the guilt and regret grew numb. They became accustomed

to the reality and left their morals behind.

Just because Katze knew the truth, and just because his eyes narrowed with distaste, that didn't mean he sought out the responsible and raised his voice in protest. Nor did he intend to. Though it was plain that to them. Katze was nothing but an eyesore. They didn't have the stones to call him out and say so to his face.

The attitude radiating from their faces was more than sufficient to drive the point home.

Still, as long as the disagreeableness and hell-raising did not come to the level of actual harm, he would let it slide. He couldn't be bothered to get himself all fit and tied about this paranoid, cowardly, thin-skinned bunch.

Indicating with his eyes for them to sit down, Katze spoke first, in a flat, emotionless voice.

"Let's see it."

"Here you go," said Judd, handing him a file folder.

This process had become routine as well, something Katze would never have expected. He wordlessly flipped through the file, carefully checking out the head shots and accompanying notes. Physical characteristics were hardly mentioned—the notes more often than not focused on intelligence, personality, psychological judgment, and the like. Instead of describing a single individual, this was more the detailed evaluation of a representative sample. He selected a number of files from the folder and spread them out on the table. The final cut for the next season's delivery of furniture to Eos.

Once upon a time, Katze had been one of those files chosen by a Tanagura representative. He was castrated and installed as living furniture in Eos. That he'd inherited that same business and was now doing the same thing was one of life's darker ironies.

When Iason had ordered him to take the job—Katze couldn't

remember how he had reacted. That was how strong the shock hit him. Naturally, when Iason called, it was always in the form of an offer Katze couldn't refuse.

Katze had a corner on almost every market involving Ceres. He fenced the cash and credit cards and stolen goods lifted from the Midas tourist trade. He was the agent for Guardian. A distributor in the drug trade. And a few fingers in many other pots. He was, as Iason called him, a man for all seasons. The right person in the right place at the right time. The slum mongrel who uniquely made good.

However, none of the men who worked in the shadows thought him any luckier than he deserved to be. They knew to the marrow of their bones that Iason, the emperor of the black market, was a ruthless meritocrat whose feelings never colored his judgment.

The past wasn't part of the picture. Ability was all that mattered. *Don't ask too many questions; pledge absolute loyalty.* Success was duly rewarded. Betrayal exacted its costs. Results, and not excuses, were all that interested him.

But that didn't mean Iason's trust was absolute and guaranteed. Katze knew that all too well. *Carrot and stick.* That was how Iason sought his undying loyalty.

When Iason served up the poison, he expected Katze to clean the plate. And just like the family that ran the foster center administrators, Katze did what he had to do to stay alive.

Raising a fist and crying *Justice!* would only expose him to a hellish carnage. In the face of absolute power, such naive idealism would be crushed. Katze understood that better than anybody.

He cut to the chase and said only what had to be said. "The tenth at three o'clock. Deliver them to the regular place."

"Understood."

Judd spoke in a far more deferential tone of voice than Katze. The well-established junior-senior relationship between them had

nothing to do with any difference in age. Though the same faithful servants of Tanagura, the difference versus those on the outside was plainly evident.

To reinforce the fact, the negotiations were not carried out remotely or through avatars, but in person, with Katze going to Guardian. Just like the rep before him.

Judd, the patriarch of his clan, was a mere Chihuahua. The black market representative was Tanagura's Doberman. They were both kept dogs, but the line separating the two of them couldn't be ignored.

And Guardian knew this well.

No matter who scratched whose back. No matter who fawned on whom. No matter the ifs and buts. None of that mattered in the least.

Judd Kuger harbored no fantasies to the contrary.

Regardless of Katze's antecedents, if the tables were turned, he'd be the one bowing and scraping. If smoothing the corners and holding his tongue was what it took to secure his position as head of Guardian, then that was what he'd do.

Even if, at his own discretion, Judd wished to make Guardian into an old money asset, he harbored no aspirations of ever being considered the equal of his Tanagura brethren. The only reward of rising above his station would be personal destruction.

But for Manon—who knew nothing of the ways of the outside world, who was equally ignorant of the wisdom of the world and the wisdom of the crowds—the rapacious nature of the business world was no less a mystery. So he could only observe the manner in which his father deferred to Katze with contempt.

That was the source of the fierceness in his eyes.

The man sitting there in front of Manon had once been Eos furniture, a fact he considered with contempt. He didn't know the true meaning of Tanagura. He was only vaguely aware of the huge

syndicate that ran the black market. And he wasn't even entirely sure what it meant to be Eos furniture.

The only thought spinning around inside Manon's head was that this man had once been sold as a slave from the world his family ran to the world of Tanagura. That was why he couldn't bring himself to acknowledge that he and Katze were members of the same tribe in Ceres.

When Katze inherited the job from his predecessor, the shock to Guardian was inestimable. It was just as it should have been. Katze knew what was hiding under every rock in Ceres, a living witness to every sin committed by the Kuger clan.

The shock showed when Katze appeared before their eyes. The in-your-face shock of a piece of furniture becoming the commercial representative for Tanagura. The fear when the imaginary bedrock beneath their feet was revealed to be nothing but sand.

Katze's previous existence had been revealed to Manon in a bitter moment when the humiliation spilled over. Manon smoldered with self-righteous indignation. There was no way he could tolerate this man, who had forgotten the gift of being brought up in Guardian and now arrogantly looked down his nose at them.

The dog didn't bite the hand that fed it. Why should his father, the patriarch of the Kuger clan, bow and scrape before this worthless piece of Furniture? And why should his son have to raise his eyes to this half-man? If anyone deserved to be begging leave, it was the Scarface sitting there in front of them—not themselves. Manon wasn't one to sit idly by and tolerate this man who took advantage of Tanagura's authority, throwing his weight around like he really was somebody.

The thought never entered Manon's mind that such questions were the product of his ignorant pride. He truly believed that all visitors to Guardian should shrink before the greatness of the Kuger name. Not to mention that approaching the business at hand with a cool, detached air, Katze betrayed no interest in Manon himself.

It was unpardonable that this man, who had never been his equal

from the start, should so completely ignore a member of the privileged class. For Manon, this was the humiliation greater than any other. He hissed under his breath, "For a fucking piece of furniture, you sure think big of yourself."

The words escaped his lips. He wanted Katze to hear. He wanted to take him down a few notches. But Katze calmly held his tongue and didn't glance in his direction. The impudence only hardened Manon further.

Rather, the one going green at the moment was Judd. He couldn't believe that his own flesh and blood would allow such incautious words to escape his mouth. The alarm froze on his face.

"I'm sorry. Please forgive the careless remarks of my idiot son." He dipped his head and spoke with great sincerity.

"I'll be sure that such a thing is never heard from him again."

Judd understood who had the power in this transaction. And he understood that his son was just a frog sitting at the bottom of a well, imagining he was seeing the whole world.

That was why it was so important that his son got to know a little more about how the real world worked—what they were really up to at Guardian—and the exact nature of their business relationships. Manon had few opportunities to apply his book-learning in the real world. It was why Judd wanted him to sit in on this meeting.

Judd hadn't figured that it might turn on him in such a fashion.

On the one hand, like Katze, Manon had once been heralded as the brightest mind seen since the beginning of Guardian. Except that the breadth of his knowledge lacked any depth. His father had utterly failed to anticipate that his own son would prove so lacking in wisdom as to make him unusable.

Such were his true feelings at that point in time. Disappointment and anger. Many years ago, there in front of his eyes, Katze had been a young man, a prodigious talent offered up by the refuse heap of the slums. But that beauty and wisdom became Katze's own

worst enemy. And when he was selected as furniture for Eos, Judd grieved from the bottom of his heart.

He'd truly believed that exceptions could be made so that Katze could stay at Guardian. He so desperately wanted talent like that, he could taste it.

Still waters soon grew fetid.

Any group of people possessing nothing but an ingrained sense of privilege were sure to produce bad fruit. He needed prodigies like Katze in order to keep the intellectual inbreeding at bay. But Judd's desires went unfulfilled.

After what Katze had been through since then—the Scarface who had become the representative for Tanagura and now sat in front of him—Judd couldn't help but feel an indescribable connection between the two of them.

Put differently, watching a prodigious talent like Katze rot on the vine as Eos furniture and then pull himself up—Judd had to bow his head in amazement and admiration. He needed no other reason.

No matter how precious the stone, it would never shine without the work and effort to polish it. Though many despised the mongrels as slum trash, it was difficult for the mongrels to seize the chance to improve their own souls. Wrenching open the doors closed to them was not just a matter of ability, but luck as well. Judd never would have expected that Katze had the intestinal fortitude required to not just talk the talk but walk the walk. Which was why he rejoiced at Katze's success as if it were his own.

That this success should, in stark contrast, become for Manon the source of such rage, struck Judd as nothing but sour grapes.

"What are you kissing this guy's ass for? He's just used-up furniture!"

"Idiot!"

The blow landed on the side of Manon's face as soon as the words emerged from his mouth. In that moment, an unpleasant and strained silence filled the space between them. Judd averted his



eyes from the bitter aftertaste of the blow as Manon's lips trembled, his anger overwhelming his surprise.

*Why didn't Manon understand? Why wouldn't he understand?* The rivalry between father and son took shape and form in that moment. Manon's eyes flickered back and forth, searching for an outlet into which he could pour the venom in his heart. His lit gaze fell upon Katze's face.

"Hey, don't sit there looking so fucking bored. Just because my father grovels to you doesn't mean I'll ever do it."

"That's enough, Manon!" Judd remonstrated, his lips trembling. More than his rage at his son's continuing and intemperate outbursts, it was his thoughts of the aftermath that awaited them that drained the blood from his face and shook his voice.

Except that the more Judd warned him, the more Manon bridled. "He may be Tanagura's agent for now, but that won't last forever. So go ahead, act big. When I'm officially put in charge of this operation, you'll be renting out space in the brothel latrines. Used-up furniture hasn't got the equipment, anyway, so it's a good thing you're such a tight-ass. I guarantee I'll be first in line to enjoy myself."

One reckless remark following the next. Katze still not sparing him even a single glance, the stream of abuse pouring out of Manon's mouth had become a geyser. Judd gave up trying to verbally discipline him. He only sank back against the couch cushions, the veins in his forehead throbbing.

"What, cat got your tongue?" Manon said with all undisguised sneer, "So your mouth's as useless as the rest of you, is that it?"

The filthier the slander, the more impassive Katze became. Not even an eyebrow twitched. Which rubbed Manon the wrong way even more. That summed up the look on Katze's face.

"I haven't got the time to bother getting upset with know-nothing runts," Katze finally answered in a disinterested tone of voice.

As far as Katze was concerned, Manon was a little poodle yapping on its master's lap. Annoying but not much else. He certainly had little intention of engaging him.

*If I don't smack him down here and now, the next time he'll be nipping at my heels and pissing on my shoes.*

An ill-bred lap dog needed a good kick in the hindquarters to knock the courage out of it. He would have thought that a job best left to Judd. But for whatever reason, it seemed that nobody had beaten any sense into the mutt yet, so the lesson wasn't learned.

Be that as it may, it was all the same to Katze. Not something he had a problem with.

"Who do you think's doing the talking here? I'm Manon Sol."

"So you are. What of it?"

"You pay respect when you address me."

"Respect?" Katze sniffed audibly. No matter how he twisted things, hearing that word from Manon left Katze speechless. Boxed up in velvet, he'd still be a useless piece of shit. Even his father had thrown in the towel trying to rescue him from his own stupidity.

*How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is to have a thankless child.* This was surely a living example of what the Bard meant. But that didn't mean Katze was in any mood to commiserate with Judd. If Judd thought it proper to sit his kid down in the same room as the grownups, then better he do so *after* the puppy had been housebroken.

But it was a little too late to deliver that message now.

"You seem to be proceeding under a false premise. You and I are the same mongrel trash from the slums."

"What the fuck do you mean by that? I—"

"You're special? Ah, but of course. Because that's what all your friends tell you. In any case, I suppose the Kuger clan does happen

to be the biggest parasite sucking at Guardian's teat."

The veins throbbed in Manon's forehead. The fury of his indignation seemed to have rendered him dumb.

"Besides, even if you knew how to keep your mouth shut, I have the feeling that when the music stops, the chairmanship of Guardian is not a seat that will be occupied by the likes of you. What do you make of that?"

In his calm and cool tones, Katze exposed a corner of the whole card that Judd had not been willing to turn over.

"You are merely Judd Kuger's son. In this world, that is all you are. So you perhaps ought to watch your mouth. My boss cares for nothing so little as an incompetent fool who can't grasp that simple logic."

Judd certainly understood it, which explained the pallid cast of his features. Incapable of denying that his son was indeed a good-for-nothing, Katze had grasped the implications, looked ahead, and taken the future from him.

"Parading that grandiose sense of entitlement around only makes you an eyesore. In any case, there's no point exchanging words with a fool who hasn't figured out that mongrel trash is and will always be mongrel trash. Do you disagree, Chairman?"

Judd could only bury his face in his hands. To Manon, the blood roaring in his ears, the gesture cut him to the quick. There was no way he could take his father's humiliating attitude as anything but the cruelest of betrayals.

Manon bit down hard on his lower lip. His fists trembled until the veins stood out beneath the skin. His eyes shot reproach at his father and hatred at Katze.

The three of them sat there in silence. Judd was likely the only one feeling its full, oppressive weight.

Manon suddenly leapt to his feet. Judd said nothing to stop him. His shoulders shaking with anger, Manon strode out of the room

without a backward glance.

The taut line of tension finally broke. Judd asked, his voice closer to a groan, "You happy?"

"I'm not the problem," Katze shot back. "Your son brought this upon himself." He lit another cigarette. "I'm not the kind of person to take such insults so lightly." He exhaled a cloud of purple smoke.

"You've always had a good head on your shoulders, Katze. You never simply thought about what you needed, but always how to address those needs precisely."

To be told that by Judd, who had taken up the reins of Guardian as a young man, was far more painful to Katze than embarrassing. *I was an insufferable prick who was good at reading faces and proud of it.* Katze had delighted in impressing himself upon the block mothers and sisters. A brat with inflated pride and his nose in the air who sought out praise as the best and brightest.

If he'd known that having a good head on his shoulders, that being a reasonable and mannered child was the number one qualification for furniture, he would have acted the exact opposite.

"After all, those qualifications are what brought you back here, aren't they?"

"The right person in the right place at the right time. That's all it comes down to in the end, Chairman."

Installing Katze as Tanagura's representative was a silent hand around Guardian's neck, the ultimate deterrence.

A transparently strategic move.

Which was why a reflexive response in opposition was unavoidable.

And that had probably been Iason's intent from the start. Using Katze as a lightning rod to exacerbate any discontent with Tanagura would allow him to make a clean sweep of the incompetents leeching off Guardian.

Tanagura's plans for the organ farm were undoubtedly nearing the next stage as well.

These and other thoughts lighting up the corners of his mind, Katze drew his eyebrows together. "Or perhaps being called a parasite by a rookie like me stung your pride as well?"

"No. Dressing up the pig at this point won't do anybody any good. Besides, I'm the one who made the exception and sat my son down in the same room with us," Judd said. He had expectations of his own to deal with.

Katze had nothing more to add in that regard. Nevertheless, he had to articulate the obvious. Perhaps purely out of concern for his old alma mater.

"Let me get to the point. I don't see you handing the business over to the likes of him."

Even if the Kuger clan were displaced as the watchers of Guardian, Katze would always remain an outsider, a bystander. Still, he could not simply stand by and watch the institution go to seed.

"That son of yours has never set foot outside this twisted little garden paradise. His sheltered upbringing and arrogant attitude would ruin any done deal. And when it comes to dealing with Tanagura, excuses about him being young and inexperienced won't cut it."

"I am fully aware how dreadfully exacting *that* person can be."

Katze didn't contradict Judd. But a man who only had to kowtow to the Blondy and nothing more had no idea how truly exacting he could be.

Still, his mind couldn't help recalling the image of the one man who, even knowing that, would snarl and bite and kick and scratch if given a chance. A small, painful sigh escaped the corner of his mouth.

"After enough time passes," Judd said, "the message is bound to sink in. Or, rather, there'll be hell to pay if it doesn't. Living in the dark

like this, it's my responsibility to show him a glimpse of the light. Other than passing on the Kuger name."

*How far will you go to preserve the bloodline?* Katze once posed the question to Judd directly: *Is that what you call the bonds of blood? The passing on of such an odious thing?*

Judd calmly answered without the slightest hesitation: the price for the hegemonic control of Guardian was knowing the true character of the twisted garden paradise.

In contrast to the bitter acrimony of a few moments before, somewhere deep in his heart, Katze felt a pang of sympathy for Manon. A derisive Smile rose to his lips. *What's this? Are we all brothers now?*

## Chapter 5

The western reaches of Ceres.

The faint rays of sun peeked through cracks in the overhanging clouds, bathing Guardian in a pure, white light. The ragged and poisoned air of the Colony did not reach past the nondescript walls that circled the institution. Here was the single lotus rising out of the muck of Ceres. Innocent. Proud. Brilliant.

But thoroughly repulsive to those who knew the true character of Ceres's most sacred ground.

Kirie arrived at Guardian that day in his shining, spotless air car. It wasn't the first time he'd come back to the foster center. Indeed, he'd been back a number of times over the past two months. The security guard at the front gate knew him on sight, and Kirie even stopped to chat with him for a few minutes.

But that didn't mean he could simply cut through the red tape required to obtain a visitor's pass. Not even a graduate of Guardian got past the gate without an appointment. Nobody just popped in to say hello.

"Educating a Child's Mind and Soul." That was the foster center's motto. Kirie had left its precincts for the slums five years ago. Two months ago, the truth about the place started to sink in.

He was dumbfounded.

Simply dropping by on a whim to poke around his old haunts required doing things by the book and going through channels and setting up a formal meeting. Unaware of that, Kirie had been turned away at the front door. He gave the guard a surprised look.

"I came all the way here. Just a quick look around—"

"No."

"C'mon, cut me a little slack—"

"No."

"Then how about you give Sister Anna a call for me—"

"No!"

No matter how humbly he begged, or how high and mighty he protested, the security guard denied him. "Just following regulations," the guard curtly insisted over and over again. Eventually, Kirie reluctantly withdrew, the unexpected reality forcing itself upon him.

*Geez, who the hell do you think you are?* he'd thought at the time, unconsciously furrowing his brow. He wanted to show off to his once helpful block mother and sister what a man he'd become in the past five years. His spirits flagged somewhat.

No, hardly flagged. *What's a fucking slum foster center acting all high and mighty about?*

His buoyant mood was dashed with a bucket of cold water. And it pissed him off. But he wouldn't give up.

*Shit, I'm getting in no matter what.* If "regulations" were all the man knew, then Kirie would follow the damned regulations. *I'm getting myself an appointment.*

First off, he got himself a smartphone and went to the Guardian site on the net and filled out all the forms for an official appointment. Of course he had to give a reason for the appointment, and his personal ID number was indispensable. But he was also obligated to provide certified proof of adult status.

*What the hell is that?*

That was when Kirie remembered the card he'd been issued when he left Guardian. The foster center's "Certificate of Adult Status." In short, it attested to the fact that he'd completed Guardian's required



education courses, was thirteen years old, and had become an "adult in good standing."

Living in the slums, the card wasn't particularly good for anything. The Guardian graduates were all issued ID cards upon entering the Colony, and most kids ended up discarding the mostly pointless certificate. The smarter ones stored it away to gather dust for the rest of their lives.

The usefulness of the ID was limited to the environs of Ceres. Ceres had been wiped off the official maps of Midas. It existed only as a kind of autonomous ghost town.

Tanagura did not recognize its existence, which was why it did not issue the residents a regulation ID.

As far as kids like Kirie were concerned, once they'd been processed and presented with their official "Certificate of Adult Status," as long as they had an ID card, they naively assumed that additional proof of their existence was unnecessary.

But not playing by the rules wouldn't work. His application would end up in the circular file. The rules were the rules, and there was no bending them to serve his purposes.

*Damn it all! What a pain in the ass!*

Kirie ended up turning his apartment upside down in order to find his Certificate. He was determined to find the thing, whether it existed or not.

When the application was finally processed, notification arrived via email accompanied by an acceptance number. That alone wasn't enough for him to gain entry. A so-called "reconfirmation" of the application took another two days.

Moreover, the meeting wouldn't be at his convenience—it would be whenever Guardian decided it would be. No questions asked.

*Geez, what a runaround. This isn't fucking Palace Tower. What's with all the checking and double-checking? Makes no fucking sense.*

It was no surprise that Kirie was so put out. It was almost as if Guardian was saying: *Once we call you an adult and kick you out of the house, there's no coming home again.*



Most people wouldn't go to this much trouble, and jump through

this many hoops, without a compelling reason. This certainly wasn't the kind of thing Kirie did just to blow off a few hours.

That was probably the aim of the foster center all along. The stifling reality of the slums was something that Guardian insistently hid from the eyes of its youthful charges, but only for a time. When they turned thirteen and became "adults," the truth was laid out before them, and all their dreams turned to dust. Only then would they realize how pointless it was to slave away.

They quickly grew accustomed to disappointment and resignation. Whatever knowledge had been stuffed into their brains in Guardian would prove useless in the outside world. Guardian was a gilded cage while the slums were a borderless landfill. An oppressive, choking landscape with no place to run. It took no more than a day or two for them to figure that out.

There was no way Guardian could open its doors again to a bunch of guys who'd had their fill of *that* reality and wanted to come back to the garden and waste away the empty hours.

It all made perfect sense. Those who ran Guardian wanted to keep any bad influences away from their children. That was their fundamental mission in life. Otherwise, their whole identity as a foster center would be shaken.

Guardian was a garden paradise, a terrarium shut away from the world. Kirie knew that now as he'd never known it before. Though he showed up at that designated date and time, he wasn't whisked inside as expected. The fences and gates circling Guardian were there for a reason, and security was extraordinarily tight. Double- and triple-checks were routine. The reason for all these measures was posted everywhere: "To prevent entry of unauthorized persons."

But the way Kirie read it, it really meant: *We haven't got the time to mess with some slum anarchists who want to put our foster kids in their crosshairs.*

It was a royal pain in the ass doing everything by the book, day after day. But a nut job anarchist from the slums had to be the least of their concerns. The kiddie porn syndicates expressly kept their

distance from the slum mongrels as well.

Even so, those kinds of outlets were common in Midas. Legal and underground, high-grade or the leftovers for the bottom feeders.

Child abuse was a serious crime in any star system. In Midas, however, it didn't lurk in the shadows. It paraded around in the open. A regulated enterprise. It was a widely known "secret" that the vast majority of the tourist trade consisted of those seeking to sate that particular predilection. If "unauthorized intruders" were allowed inside, the penniless and cornered residents of the slums would doubtlessly come begging.

Consequently, Kirie figured that as far as he was concerned, having taken the time to come this far, they might as well give him the damned pass. He couldn't come to any other conclusion.

The more he thought about it, the more pissed off he became. *If they've got that kind of money to spend protecting a bunch of kids, you'd think they could spare a few pennies for a decent rec center.*

He resolved himself then and there: he was doing what it took to get out of the slums. That was his pressing dream. But with no connections and without a regulation ID, even if he left the slums, there'd be no place for him in Midas.

It was so plain, so sickeningly obvious. Midas was one big pleasure palace. There he could eat, play, and shop until he was dead on his feet, sleep it off, and start all over again. But only if he had money and an ID.

There was nowhere in *that* Midas where a slum mongrel could sneak in and find a place to settle down for the long haul. Kirie could cuss and swear and snarl, but for the time being, the slums were the only place he could call home.

Home for Kirie was crowded with stallions as useful to their species as geldings. With youthfulness to spare and violence in their bones, they wasted away their days gangbang and the nights banging each other.

Guardian provided a wide variety of diversions and amusements to keep the children from becoming bored and restless. But there was nothing like that in the slums.

It didn't have to be pretty. It didn't have to be grand. Something like a Guardian playground for adults would have made all the difference. The raw reality was that a fun night in the slums was playing chicken with a patched-together jet bike.

Or cruising Midas for thrills and profit. But even there, the challenge came down to nothing more than swiping cash cards. Do it badly enough and the cops would beat a kid within an inch of his life. No small threat. The Midas cops and the Vigilante Corps had more respect for livestock than for slum mongrels.

Put in those terms, Kirie was furious with the paltry reach of their lives. *What the hell do those Guardian assholes think they're up to?*

For the time being, Ceres was an autonomously governed district. So it had a political structure where the big shots and fat cats could relax. But in fact, the administrators of Guardian sat at the top of a slag heap. And everybody in the slums knew it.

But the Kuger family kept Guardian and their little Eden under lock and key with themselves shut up in it. They never showed their faces in the slums. And yet, no one thought that was strange for a "public" corporation. Though, until very recently, neither had Kirie. It was just another bit of slum common sense.

Once Kirie had graduated from the foster center, he hadn't had the luxury of ruminating about his life there. It was enough for him to stay with the flow while keeping his head above water. One day after the next.

Nevertheless, Guardian's uniqueness, its special place in the greater society, was imprinted on his mind. The one spot of holy ground in Ceres that was off limits.

The Kuger family had taken upon itself the duty of protecting the precious female assets of Ceres, and to raise their children. And if they chose to cloister themselves within Guardian's sacred walls,

that was certainly their prerogative. Who were the rest of them to argue?

That was what Kirie had thought too. But now things were different. Meeting face-to-face with one of the elites from the Tanagura aristocracy changed him somehow. Struck a spark. Aroused a new hunger in his gut.

Starved for information, he became aware of the reality of the slums. He learned how Midas worked. His eyes were drawn to what he hadn't seen before—or, rather, what he hadn't looked for.

He began to pay close attention to those things that in the midst of the daily boredoms, he would have previously batted aside lazily without a second thought. He keenly felt that nothing would happen if he just waited.

In the process, Kirie looked at Guardian with new eyes as well. He hadn't shown the slightest interest before. But now his curiosity was above the norm. And the reason had a lot to do with his repeated visits to Guardian, and all the loathsome, annoying paperwork. The last of which included some final papers he needed to sign before getting past the front gate:

1. Unscheduled contact with the children outside the interview room is prohibited.
2. Your visitor's name tag must be worn at all times.
3. You must vacate the premises at the appointed time.

The security guard signaled an all-clear, and Kirie was finally allowed to enter the facilities.

*I feel like I've been through the wringer.*

But Kirie suppressed the grating initiation in his heart. He nodded politely to the guard, who had by now become a familiar face.

"Thank you for all your kind attention," he said.

The man had been the bane of his existence and a ridiculous waste of his time, but Kirie had to jump through those hoops to get inside. That was what the hoops were there for. Kirie planned on making a number of return visits. And though the man was a flunky security guard, leaving a good impression went a long way. It was all part of his calculations.

Perhaps because the afternoon classes had begun, he didn't see any children anywhere. The grounds of the center were completely silent. Rather than continuing down the hallway, with accustomed steps, Kirie cut across the inner courtyard. That was the shortest route to the assigned meeting place.

That was when his raised eyes unexpectedly caught a glimpse of the angel—the symbol of Guardian—adorning the old-fashioned clock.

*Huh. I'm ten minutes late. Well, he knew he wasn't going to arrive on time. Wouldn't hurt 'em to cool their heels for a while. A little taste of what they keep putting me through.*

If he was going to be late, he was going to be late. Hurrying wouldn't change that. He slowed to a more leisurely gait. Arriving after a fashion at the Number Three rec mom, Kirie opened the door without bothering to knock. A storm of noise and sound suddenly assaulted his ears.

Toward the front of the large room filled with virtual reality gaming equipment, unabated by even the soundproofing walls, Manon was firing off a laser gun.

*Ah, our Little Lord Fauntleroy is in a rotten mood.*

Kirie had never beheld such an easy-to-understand kid in his life. And at the opposite end of the spectrum, his mind couldn't help flashing back to the toughest bunch of customers he'd ever had to deal with.

Kirie's lips bent into something of a smirk. The Jeeks incident had elevated that bunch to the talk of the slums. Everywhere he went



nowadays, that name was spoken. Jeeks's so-called Hyper Kids had put on a tough face and loosed a reign of terror in the slums, making themselves a real problem.

The gang that took care of them would be the heroes of the hour.

There were those who welcomed these developments, and those who did not. Unrestrained envy and inflated jealousies. The slums reacted in every way a man could imagine.

*The resurrection of Bison is around the corner*, said the relentless rumors.

And yet Kirie was hardly mentioned. Delivering that tear gas bomb to the Jeeks safe house was Kirie's doing. And tipping over that domino marked the beginning of the end for Jeeks.

But nobody had bothered to thank him. Far from it. He'd been informed in no uncertain terms that if he wanted to keep his limbs intact, he'd never show his face around again.

Riki had torn him down badly. The exhilaration from taking down Riki's wingman still hadn't sunk in. In fact, the victory tasted sour in his mouth. The bitterness throbbed painfully in his heart.

But Kirie harbored no regrets. He didn't need any warm camaraderie. Give him another similar chance to sell out a friend and he'd do it in a heartbeat.

*It's all the same to me. Who's gonna be the last man standing, huh? You'll eat those words.* And to get that done, Kirie had plans at Guardian.

Manon aimed at his targets with a practiced and sure hand. He was as good at the game as a player could get. For a kid's first-person-shooter video game, that is. It could hardly be a satisfactory achievement for the twenty-year-old Manon. And perhaps his own realization of this was the source of his irritation. Or maybe it was the product of some other problem. Manon grumbled to himself in self-disgust and bashed the gun against the floor.

Deliberately needling him, Kirie said in an unflattering tone of voice with thick sarcasm, "As skilled as I expected. Awful damned frustrating when they don't fight back. Makes you want to take it out on somebody, eh, Manon?"

Manon jerked around, furrowing his brow. "Don't go addressing me so casually."

*Hey, hey. Your beef ain't with me.*

As well as completely missing the sarcasm, Manon's sense of pride, as always, rose to the fore. It was another thing about him that never changed.

Kirie and Manon had once been block mates. For three years they lived in the same block of dorms, sleeping and eating together. Nevertheless, the three years in age separating them created a distance that Kirie could not surmount easily.

Add to that the fact that Manon was the boss' son and he always had his own clique surrounding him. Guys like Kirie were never more than block mates, always just hovering at the edges of Manon's vision.

The first time Manon bothered to say hello, Kirie introduced himself and referred to their shared history together. Manon hadn't reacted in the slightest. He didn't remember a thing about Kirie.

Kirie didn't take it personally. Thinking back on when he was a clueless kid himself, it was all the same. The only thing important to him was his relationship with Manon from that point forward.

"If you're still looking to get your hands on a free-entry pass," Manon shot back in his high-handed manner, radiating his intolerable sense of privilege, "then you'd better learn to call me Master Manon."

*A free-entry ID pass, eh? Well, if he really could pull strings in that department—*

It seemed to Kirie that about all Manon could do at this juncture was wave to him from the other side of the gate. Right now, the

only one of them with any personal experience as to how Guardian security treated visitors was Kirie. Not Manon.

"Hey, you listening to me?"

Since their days in Guardian, there was no doubt that the passing years had only exacerbated Manon's pride.

"I do beg your pardon," Kirie said, with an exaggerated shrug of resignation. Still, he couldn't suppress the thin smile that rose to his lips.

There was an overarching self-confidence embodied in the arrogance that made Kirie *Kirie*. Even now, he made no attempt to hide it. If necessary, he would. But over these past two months, Manon had become accustomed enough to his presence that he didn't bother.

Manon indignantly nodded in turn.

Kirie approached him with deliberate reserve. Though Manon's eyes briefly narrowed in frustrated irritation, Kirie maintained an impassive front.

*Yeah, let's see you hold on and beg for it. The world wasn't custom-made for you, poor little rich boy.*

Nothing was guaranteed to turn out the way Manon wanted. He was too young, too inexperienced, and without real connections. He could whine about it as much as he wanted, but in the end, it added up to nothing but excuses.

This past year, Kirie had learned that lesson until it hurt. Results were what mattered, not the details. The ends, not the means. Losing was nothing. Winning was everything. If he wanted to count himself among the winners, he had to reach out and grab that brass ring himself. No matter the price. No matter the sacrifice.

Kirie didn't doubt. He didn't hesitate. He was committed. No matter where the fault lay—no matter where the good or evil resided—his truth was the only truth that counted. And *that* Kirie was the one who got under Manon's skin and inflamed his passions.

Annoyed, Manon drew his lips into a tight line. He quickly approached Kirie, then grabbed him and yanked him closer. Kirie stumbled forward. Manon caught him as if waiting for him.

"What are you dawdling around for? Don't make me wait!"

"It's all that runaround and paperwork. That's why the sooner I get that free-entry pass, the better."

Kirie smiled thinly out of the corners of his mouth, while teasingly entwining the gaze of his mismatched eyes with those of Manon's. He knew well that his curious eyes turned on many men in the slums. Glistening eyes glancing up from beneath his brow, wet and enticing.

That alone was enough to make men fall for him. Only Riki and Guy had resisted his charms. Those two were a maddening, infuriating, everlasting breed apart. Although their reactions were strange as well.

He'd made a play for Guy and Guy hadn't fallen for him. In frustration, Kirie called him impotent. Guy knocked him down hard. *I'm not into pissy little kids just out of their diapers.* It was like getting hit in the gut so hard he couldn't even breathe.

The one blot on his record he couldn't wipe clean.

Kirie batted the memory away as soon as it rose up in his thoughts. Wrapping his arms around Manon's back, he thrust his hips forward. He didn't sell himself cheap. But when he threw himself into a part, he played it to the hilt. That was his policy.

Their eyes and noses a hair's breadth apart, Manon's throat trembled slightly.

"With that pass in hand, I'll fly here in a jiffy. Right into your—"

Manon smothered the rest of the sentence with a kiss. Unrelenting, hungry, and fierce. Kirie parted his lips slightly in response. Their tongues entwined. Tangling together so Kirie could not flee. Sucking all the harder to keep him close. Thick, clumsy, persistent kisses. And all the time, Manon's hands traveled over Kirie's torso

restlessly, glued against him. More than words, the touch of their bodies communicated to Kirie Manon's desire for this long-awaited tryst.

Hands stroking Kirie's back, grabbing at his tight ass. Too impatient to bother with the fly, Manon groped and grabbed between Kirie's thighs. A fervent desire revealed itself in the heat of each clinging kiss.

Kirie gasped between ragged breaths, "That's a hell of an appetite you've got there. Not the kind of thing to be putting on public display."

With a start, Manon's eyes darted frantically around the room, as if searching for spies. Kirie permitted himself a private smile. Manon must have been going crazy all week. It was only their first date of the week, and Manon was already pumped and ready.

It was a mistake to claim that the heavy security kept the captive princess safe and secure in her tower. Inside Guardian's gilded birdcage, the heir to the Kuger throne—the little prince, so clueless and vain—anxiously awaited Kirie to be allowed in.

Their individual senses of purpose differed as widely as their accumulated experiences. Kirie was always the one who took the initiative. Though this fact never penetrated Manon's thick skull.

Manon grabbed Kirie by the arm and dragged him into a nearby room. His lusts ignited by their kisses, Manon didn't have the perseverance to go all the way back to his rooms.

Kirie didn't bother protesting that it was a nap room for tired children. Playing any harder-to-get at this point would only put Manon in a bad mood.

"Hurry up and take off your clothes," Manon barked hoarsely.

Kirie quickly removed his top and undershirt. And then he changed pace, slowly pulling down his zipper. He wasn't so much playing the cock tease as he was deliberately inflaming Manon's desires.

Having stripped himself bare, Kirie smiled magnificently. It was

more than enough to thrust Marion's already out-of-control cock skyward.

"C'mere," said Kirie.

Manon seized him, his nostrils flaring. His face buried against Manon's shoulder, Kirie smiled coldly to himself. *Piece of cake*. With every passing day, the scion of Guardian was falling into his grasp. That smile rose from his absolute confidence.

On the application form, Kirie had listed his reason for visiting Guardian: *I want to give a little back to the institution that did so much for me*.

Anybody who knew Kirie wouldn't have believed their eyes reading that, "Whose chain does he think he's yanking here?" they would have wanted to know.

But Kirie was serious. He'd pour his money into whatever pockets it look to accomplish his goals. He'd tone down the ostentation and arrogance, and make himself out to be as normal as possible. And deliver saccharine lines like that with a straight face.

Nobody would have believed it unless they saw it for themselves.

Kirie had been coming and going from Guardian for two months now, bearing comics and toys that were rare for the guarded children.

Having grown up there, Kirie knew what was in poor supply at the foster center and what the children wished for. What the adults pressed on them and what they actually wanted were rarely the same. But with time, the children learned not to demand that which they could not have.

Everything was divvied up equally among them. Both material things and displays of affection. So the children were keenly aware that there was never enough.

Non-material goods couldn't just be dropped off in good-will

packages. So Kirie found a way to convert what he'd wanted *then* into concrete form and present it to them *now*. The block mothers and sisters were uniformly impressed. As Kirie expected they would be. Nothing like this had happened since the beginnings of Guardian. Guardian graduates simply did not return once they'd left the nest. They certainly did not come bearing gifts.

Nevertheless, while delighting that Kirie had grown up in every way they could have wished for, the women and girls did not press their inquiries too far. They themselves had never set foot outside Guardian's Edenic gardens, and were unaware of what kind of life awaited their charges in Ceres.

They passed the time there all smiles and warmth, getting by with a tacit understanding: *Keeping your council to yourself gives you less to mourn*. That was an unwritten law.

Kirie visited as often as he could, approximately once a week. The paperwork remained as onerous as ever. But during that time, he shrewdly never let his smile waver, and played the role of generous big brother perfectly.

Of course he was never allowed direct contact with the children. Yet during his friendly chats with the sisters during the afternoon teas, there were always children lurking in the background, curious about what was going on.

*I must appear as some strange creature to them*. Kirie couldn't help flashing a wry smile. He knew very well that the children weren't the only ones looking on with wide eyes.

The young man who stayed behind despite reaching adulthood at the age of thirteen—the one being held in reserve—who would, before long, take the weight of the institutional bloodline upon his shoulders—

Kirie could definitely not make the first move in his direction. Whenever their eyes met, he would only nod silently in reply. Unless the other party approached him first, the effort would have no meaning. That was his whole operating strategy.

*Come—come here—come to me*, Kirie prayed, feigning ignorance of the storm stirring around him. He knew at a glance that he sat at the eye of a storm, the focus of everyone's attention.

In any case, Kirie was a resident of the landfill that was the Ceres slums. From the point of view of those sealed inside the garden, he became the focus of their disdain, sympathy, and throbbing curiosity.

*Come—quickly—and fall into my arms*, He broadcast these silent petitions into the ether.

And when, according to plan, Manon did call to him in his haughty voice, Kirie congratulated himself: *I did it!* It was enough to make him raise his arms to the heavens in triumph.

After that, every time Kirie visited Guardian, he did not let pass any opportunity to nonchalantly press forward his advantage with Manon.

At first, they only talked. He didn't force Manon's hand. He kept things on an even keel. Kirie had been out of Guardian for five years. His wiles and iron will alone had kept him from being eaten up by the slums. Getting the older, prouder, and utterly clueless Manon to eat out of his hand was far easier.

He tickled Manon's self-esteem with flattering words. Ingratiated himself without fawning. Casually provoked him again and again. And conquered him in short order.

Unlike the slums, where guy-on-guy was par for the course, the men who ruled Ceres had easy access to women. At least that was what Kirie had believed. But Manon—who should have had his pick of the litter—was left to fume and rage: "Women who can have children are the assets of Ceres. I can't just sleep around with whoever I want."

For the one bloodline in Ceres allowed to take a childbearing wife, there were unwritten rules that could not be violated. They couldn't fuck whatever fancied the eye with the same enviable abandon of the mongrels in the slums.



Far from it. *The men of this family must follow the letter of the law and deport themselves as gentlemen.* In front of the block mothers and sisters as well.

There was no playing the field. No cutting loose. No fooling around. No unseemly behavior. No sexual harassment of any sort. Knowing all that, Kirie looked at Manon with sympathetic eyes.

Life in the birdecge was not the same as that of the stagnant, suffocating slums. But in its own way, it was just as oppressive. The slums offered no chance of sexual union with a live, human woman. But same-sex romps were there for the having. At least in that department, the slum mongrels could be called the more privileged of the two.

The sexual impulse was still there, but had to be controlled. Manon showed absolutely no inclination to reveal how he dealt with this dilemma. But he did not appear to get turned off when Kirie came onto him. Seeing the temptation take hold, Kirie had no problem guessing where things were going.

Consequently, having done it once, Manon only wanted more. He had partners with whom to sate his compelling sexual drives, but he did not appear to possess the kind of experience worth boasting about. For Manon, the unreserved nature of male companionship and Kirie's skilled ministrations were enough.

Kirie set Manon in his sights for no reason except that he was the rightful successor to the Kuger family name. There could be no downside to getting involved with the man who would someday become top dog in Ceres as the head of Guardian.

Skimming a profit off his fellow slum mongrels wouldn't be enough. After that business with the Tanagura Blondy and Guy, Kirie now craved more, sweeter dealings. Having tapped—at least in his own mind—into such a powerful pipeline, he couldn't go back.

But as soon as the deal was done with Guy, the connection with Iason ceased.

That prize of ten thousand *kario* had proved not so much a retainer

as a termination-of-services fee. That realization hit Kirie like a two-by-four to the back of the head. There was no way for Kirie to reach out to Jason on his own. His "sure thing" evaporated before his eyes.

With this loss, his brain locked up. He felt like he'd lost his bearings while at sea, and didn't know which way to turn. As he racked his gray matter and thought things through, "Guardian" was the one word that kept coming back.

It wasn't like Kirie could lay claim to the kind of heavy-duty street cred that Riki once had. And he didn't have the connections in the big-time black market syndicates to vouch for him.

Even if he got lucky enough to grab onto somebody's coattails, the best he could manage at this point was some gofer position way down at the bottom of the organizational chart. There was no way he was settling for piss work like that. No way he'd end up somebody else's bitch on anybody's terms but his own.

Though Kirie had that extremely generous fee of ten thousand *kario*, without a proper ID card, it wasn't enough to propel him into the true ranks of the nouveau riche.

But either way, face cards or junk, the more he held, the better. And better to risk his bankroll on Guardian, where he held a home field advantage, than in Midas.

The typically off-putting way Manon flaunted his sense of privilege wouldn't put Kirie off his game. Compared to the Bison bad boys, Kirie knew exactly how to push Manon's buttons. For all Manon's overarching pride, he was profoundly naïve.

Manon was, if anything, Kirie's sexual slave.

Sex being the first step to true bonding, a single, delicious piece of information gleaned from the pillow talk was icing on the cake. It guaranteed to keep on paying dividends.

Which was why Kirie wasn't interested in bouts of hot and heavy sex accompanied by sounds no more articulate than grunting and heavy breathing.

Rather, he preferred sex that took things slowly, that brought things to a boil, all the while exchanging sweet whispers. Tending to each other with ceaseless, tender caresses. Drawing every private thought from Manon's mouth. At first, Manon stubbornly kept his thoughts to himself. But in the face of the mounting pleasure, his will steadily eroded away.

Kirie's efforts had thus far been rewarded with a rough understanding of Guardian's organizational chart. The place of social status and rank within the bloodline grew clear. Which management positions had become hereditary. Who in which branch of the family got along with whom. Who harbored grudges against whom.

Even the block mothers and sisters divided up into factions. And so on and so forth.

An unexpected name spilled from Manon's lips. Kirie's antenna suddenly shot up. "Who? Who's that?"

"Who's what?"

"That guy you were just mumbling about."

Manon drew his eyebrows together in contemplation, recalling who he'd been going on about. "You mean, Katze?"

"Yes, him. Who's that again?"

"Somebody that's got nothing to do with you."

Maybe so, but Kirie still wanted to know. *Katze. The Scarface*. A big man in the black market. Kirie had never actually seen the man in person. But there was no way he wouldn't know the name. He'd heard plenty about Katze trawling for information in Midas. Somehow, Katze was tied up with Riki. Katze had caught wind of Riki's talents in the slums and brought him up to the major league.

Quickly, Riki had elevated from a mongrel courier to a teamster in the interstellar transport business. A real rags-to-riches success

story. As much fact as fiction. But the word was that with Katze throwing his considerable weight behind him, the moniker "Dark Riki" came well-earned.

When Kirie had first heard the rumors, he'd believed that in the final analysis, there were only two kinds of human beings: the lucky ones and the unlucky ones.

The lucky ones sucked the life out of those around them and only grew stronger. The unlucky ones were condemned to lose everything and spend the remainder of their days slinking in the lower depths. From the moment of birth, the slum mongrels bore the burden of the unlucky ones. Good for nothing but compost rotting at the bottom of a landfill.

Nobody could do what Riki did.

Or, rather, nobody could *but* Riki.

Except that Kirie never imagined he'd hear the name Katze tumbling out of Manon's mouth. That same god of luck that had once smiled upon Riki. So his surprise was all the greater.

Perhaps this was no accident. No, this was *his* chance to be one of the lucky ones. The curiosity made him raise his head, with the lingering hope that this Katze was one and the same person. His interest was inexhaustible on this subject.

"C'mon, who is it?"

Manon sniffed with obvious discontent. "Hey, don't stop."

He was complaining that Kirie—having focused all his attention on Katze—had interrupted their lovemaking. Kirie calmly disregarded the complaint.

"Who is this guy?"

"Nothing. Just some bastard with a big attitude who doesn't know his place. He'll be kissing my ass before long."

Manon's tone sharpened to a point. He really had it in for this guy.

This peaked Kirie's curiosity all the more. Manon was by and large indifferent to everything except that which affected him personally. But this business with Katze had him showing his true colors. Something about Katze had definitely offended him.

"Hmm. Looks like you really can't stand the man." Kirie said, goading Manon deliberately, "He wouldn't be a more handsome, higher-ranked person than you, would he?"

The bundle of pride and conceit and arrogance that was Manon—the one true heir to the fortunes of the Kuger clan—could not keep quiet when his place in the universe was questioned.

"Yeah, who does that fucking defective think he is?"

*Defective.* That word alone sent Kirie's heart racing. "A defective—huh. Somebody with a spotted past, perhaps? Or some missing parts?"

"Got a scar a mile long on his face."

*Bingo!* Kirie all but shrieked to himself. Then this was definitely Scarface Katze they were talking about. The questions bubbled inside him. What was the connection between this Guardian scion and a black market boss?

Or maybe Manon had no clue about the magnitude of Katze's reputation in that other, darker world. The thought suddenly came to him. Only in ignorance would Manon have so casually bandied Katze's name about.

*So Katze is dealing with the Kuger clan? Up close but under the table?*

A smooth operator weaseled his way into the graces of the high and mighty under false pretenses and made easy pickings of them—that was a story everybody knew. Kirie didn't know whether or not he could get a foothold in the high society the Kuger clan occupied. But the fact was, for the time being, nobody questioned their top-dog status in Ceres.

*Then a market operator could play his cards right and start meddling in Guardian's business?*

While it wasn't totally unbelievable, the actual possibilities seemed thin. How would anybody ever pull that off in the festering landfill of the slums? Nobody in the market would be that foolhardy to try. Besides, if anything that delicious existed in Ceres, Ceres would have long ago ceased being the dump it was.

So what were the real reasons hiding in the shadows? He could ponder such questions later. Right now, Kirie wasn't focused on the black market in general. But on Katze alone.



Judging from Manon's tone of voice, he'd met Katze in the flesh.

*When? Where? Under what pretenses?* Asking himself those questions, Kirie's pulse pounded and his brain buzzed. Scarface Katze, once known to him only in whispers and rumors, had suddenly become flesh and bone. He felt a thrill up his spine.

"So—tell me—what do you have against this guy, anyway?" Kirie asked in a low voice, pulling Manon's body over his own like a quilt. "What kind of guy is this Katze?"

"Nothing to do with you," Manon said with a sour, dismissive air.

*My, my, Manon. We are in a bad mood, now, aren't we?*

Kirie was probably getting a bit too excited at the mention of Katze's name. Showing undue interest in another guy while in bed with Manon no doubt stung Manon's towering pride. Not to mention that there was plainly some history between them.

Meaning that if he didn't change his approach to the subject, Manon was only going to get more pissed off and closed-mouthed.

"Hey, hey, don't let it get you down—" Kirie entwined his legs with Manon's and took a firm, kneading grip of his limp member. "But it seems to me you really have a beef with the guy. Got under your skin, huh?"

Kirie kissed him lightly, as if to make the hurt go away. When he did, Manon wrapped his arms around Kirie's back and turned him over and kissed him hungrily, plying their tongues together. Lusting after more intense stimulation, he pressed and rubbed his midsection against Kirie's.

For a short while, Kirie let Manon indulge himself in the foreplay. But at this rate, the important matter of Katze was going by the wayside, and he couldn't abide that. He twisted his body, pinning Manon again.

Their lips parted with a loud, lewd, wet sound, leaving Manon panting. Kirie licked Manon's left nipple, snapping playfully at the hard, excited bud. Manon's rod stiffened and lengthened in Kirie's hand, and his hips began to undulate as the sweet gasps escaped his



mouth.

*A little too soon. He comes after I find out what I need to know about Katze.*

Kirie's fingers tightened around the base of Manon's cock, making the man glare at him with resentful eyes.

"Don't look at me like that," Kirie said with a slight smile, and kissed his mouth.

His tongue trailed tip Manon's throat. From the nape of his neck to the lobe of his ear. Lapping like at cat's tongue across smooth skin. A shiver ran down Manon's arms from the tips of his shoulders, his sensitive areas. His vulnerable zones. His weaknesses. Kirie had learned them all.

"C'mon, Manon," Kirie whispered, nipping at the earlobe. "Tell me. What do you and Katze have to do with each other?"

"N-none—of—your—business—!" Coming to the end of the sentence, Manon's voice grew hoarse and shrill.

"It's OK. You can tell me. I want to know *everything* about you. I'm all ears. Night and day." As Kirie spoke, his fingers played across Manon's taut, wet rod.

"S-stop—" But there was oddly little force behind the command.

As the flushed and flustered Manon reveled in pleasures he'd never known before, Kirie couldn't help laughing to himself. Simply stroking Manon with the pads of his fingers quickly brought the young man's breath to a standstill. Applying the tip of his tongue to the erect tip aroused shameful cries.

When it came to extracting information from Manon, playing with him down there always did the trick. With lingers and tongue. Nuzzling and stroking and playing him like a fine-tuned instrument, Manon couldn't hold out for long.

His proud and haughty mouth was incapable of straight dealing. But his hard and throbbing member always bowed to the demands

of pleasure. Kirie rubbed his fingers into him just right. "Ahhh—" Manon moaned, his voice rising sharply. Wanton lust spilled from his mouth and from the honeyed mouth of his erection.

Massaging him as the drips and drops of precum wet Kirie's fingers proved an unbearable enough stimulation that Manon's balls suddenly constricted and lifted up. Kirie trailed his fingers down Manon's shaft, dug in his nails, and exposed the flesh hidden beneath the pouch. A sharp cry erupted from Manon's mouth.

"You're getting awfully ripe and red down here." The swollen tissues lifted slightly and trembled as Kirie applied his touch.

Manon's throat bent like a bow. "Ahhh"

"Please, won't you tell me?" Kirie whispered, his fingers rubbing mercilessly against the exposed flesh.

"Hahhh—"

Twice shallowly, and a third time. The fourth time, pushing deeper.

"Yahhh—"

Spasms rippled along the arc of Manon's throat as he shrieked. But no sideways motion of his head got Kirie to stop. Instead, at that moment, the deeply penetrating sensations wiped Manon's brain clean of any thoughts at all.

Manon's steadfast refusal to share his knowledge was ticking Kirie off. *Manon's providing a hard nut to crack today.* A hand job was usually enough to make him spill. *So we're talking about some truly scandalous information, then?* That thought brought an indulgent smile to Kirie's lips.

Honey oozed thickly from Manon's shuddering and swollen tip. With the trunk steeled in Kirie's grasp, the heat suffusing Manon's body had no place to go. *Damn. I've painted myself into a corner here. Should I let you come, then?*

There was so much he wanted to know. In which case, it'd probably be best to get him off at least once. After all, this was Manon's once-

a-week round of sex. But Kirie rebelled at letting the unusually stubborn Manon so easily get what he wanted.

Kirie sank his fingertips into Manon's quivering flesh, gently probing the nerves. The stimulation set Manon's hips into motion, drawing sweet coos from his throat. Their bodies rubbed hard against each other, as if to squeegee off the persistent, clinging heat.

"Ahhh—Hahhh—" Manon howled as the paroxysms coursed up his sides. Drawing some small satisfaction from that hoarse, pulsating voice, Kirie released his grip. Instantly, a shiver shot through Manon's limbs, yanking his sinews tight. The white semen sprayed out of him.

"Hey, wow," Kirie needled him in a calmly bemused voice. "Man, you really must have been bottling it up."

Manon's shoulders heaving, feebly gasping for breath, he couldn't answer. More than being coaxed and aroused and driven to ejaculation, the orgasm arising from intense stimulation had spent his reserves. He collapsed like that first marathon runner, half-dead, struggling for air.

*Huh. Well, before Manon gets pissed at me, let's hurry up and give it another try.*

He didn't think he'd taken things too far this time. But he could expect Manon to quickly revert to his old, bitter self, once he came down from his orgasm. Before that happened, Kirie needed to extract whatever information from him he could.

Kirie retrieved a small tube from his pack. He grabbed a leg of the still-heaving Manon and flipped him over. Seizing his buttocks with both hands, he opened up the crevice between them. Manon's secret bud, that Kirie's normally diligent lovemaking would rarely arouse, was already moist from the preceding trickles of precum.

*The little bastard's sticky all the way down here. I really outdid myself this time.*

"I don't like it there," and "Stop it," Manon said with his lips. But

Kirie knew otherwise. He knew perfectly well that the sensations he exposed and dragged out of Manon were more than enough to make him writhe with pleasure. That being the case, should he proceed this time unhindered to turn Manon into a pile of soggy pudding?

For reasons Kirie didn't totally understand himself, when he looked at Manon, Kirie really wanted to hurt the boy. Usually, he'd prostitute himself piece by piece if that was what it took to extract information from him. Kiss his ass and lick his feet. He'd stop at nothing. And yet, now and then, the unstoppable urges would bubble up from the core of his brain. To torment him and abuse him. Make him grovel. Fuck him over properly.

*Careful, man. The little prince is my meal ticket. Treat him with kid gloves.*

These thoughts dancing through his mind, Kirie opened the tube and smeared his hand with lubrication. And then slowly pushed his finger between Manon's cheeks.

Manon's buttocks twitched and quivered.

"That's OK, that's OK. No worries. Just a little love jelly. I brought a super special flavor for you today. Right off the shelves in Midas."

Perhaps reassured, Manon unclenched his muscles and relaxed.

"Got to loosen thing up here, you know. It's only once a week. You don't perhaps do a little playing down here yourself while you're jacking off?"

"No—no—way—"

"Like I thought. It doesn't really hit the spot, does it? You can't really get yourself off like that, can you?"

"I—I—"

"You like me playing with you and sucking you off, don't you? And I know you like getting all big and hard inside my mouth. Hell, you get so big it makes my jaw hurt. And like we were just doing, stroking your hot tip, making you come so last." The frank lines

weren't exactly pillow talk, but Kirie used them as he squeezed out a good half of the contents of the tube and amply applied it with his finger. "But this—penetrating you right here—you like this more than anything else. Right?"

The nail struck squarely on the head, Manon could only clench his teeth and hold his tongue. There was no way he could deny the truth at this juncture. He was too aware of his hopeless addiction to Kirie's sexual prowess. The week that elapsed between Kirie's visits to Guardian passed so slowly. His body smoldered and burned in growing anticipation.

"Getting back to our recent conversation—"

Kirie daubed up the jelly he was slathering on Manon's tightened bud and raked his fingers across the man's balls. That alone sent a shiver through Manon's hindquarters. The jelly penetrating his inner walls melted away his resistance, burning and throbbing as it stimulated the tender flesh.

Kirie traced the outlines of Manon's most private place with his slippery finger. "This Katze fellow—who is he?"

"I—said—not—your—"

"Oh, don't tell me." Kirie said, toying with him. "He's not sticking it in here too?"

Kirie knew better than anyone that Manon had been a virgin in that area.

"Idiot. I'll tell you. He's furn—" He caught himself at the last moment and hastily clamped his mouth shut.

"Huh. Well, I suppose you have a very good reason for not telling me. Right?" he said, at the same time twisting his finger only slightly into the crevice that so greedily pulsated at his touch.

"Ahhh—"

Manon moaned, despite all his attempts at self-control.

"Cough it up, Manon." He wrenched the shallowly buried finger inside him. "He an old lover of yours?"

His finger stroked the burning, enchanted flesh.

"Hahhh—"

Guttural moans of pleasure erupted from Manon's mouth.

"Is that what he is to you?" Kirie whispered closely. He buried the finger down to the knuckle.

"Ahhh—hahhh—"

Manon's thighs spasmed and elevated. Kirie clamped one hand around Manon's midsection and twisted and turned the finger of the other.

And then stopped. "Tell me. Or it stops here." Manon's buttocks trembled. "You don't want slow and easy, do you? You want me to jam it inside, don't you?"

As he teased Manon verbally, Kirie provided the physical proof, thrusting in and abrading him slowly, making Manon's lips tremble. "How long are you going to hold out on me?"

It couldn't be long now. *Not with that fast-acting aphrodisiac mixed in with the lubricant.* The thickly applied jelly soaked in and set to work. Manon would be throbbing inside so badly he couldn't stand it.

"Confess."

Smiling to himself, Kirie leisurely plunged down to the nub of Manon's pleasure center. "Ah. Here it is. Your favorite spot." Probing further, Kirie nudged it once.

Manon squealed. His back bent. He pushed his hips into the air, a new charge of life suffusing his just-spent member.

"You want me to play with you here, don't you?"

Manon's face was dark with excited blood. His clenched mouth burred with a barely contained frenzy.

"I'm the only one, right? I'm the only one who knows your favorite places. I'm the only one who fucks you just the way you like it. What do you say, Manon?"

"D-don't—s-stop—"

"You're saying that you please don't want me to stop?"

"Please. I'm begging you." His mouth crooked from the strain. His voice drenched in desire pushed to the edge of endurance.

This was their once-a-week tryst. The weekly fast left Manon so starved that the thought of leaving things half-undone, his body aching for more, drove him mad.

Kirie permitted himself a satisfied smile. "Tell me and you'll get what you want. What's your business with Katze?"

A quiver ran down Manon's throat. He roared once in animalistic frustration. Then licked his lips and added in a low voice, "The bastard comes here to buy furniture for Eos—"

Manon's reason and self-constraint crumbled in the face of such enchanting, lascivious temptations. He revealed what should never be known outside the precincts of Guardian.

Coaxing him with sweet words. Playing with his private places. Slowly torturing him. And then denying him. Burning his parched body until it uncontrollably danced and twitched and spasmed. Intoxicated with the drug that was Kirie, Manon suffered every symptom of an addict's withdrawal.

"Eos furniture?" Kirie hadn't heard those words before. Urging Manon on, Kirie probed the muscled flesh of his aroused partner. "What's that?"

Manon's torso jerked and convulsed, and Kirie buried the finger deeper.

"C'mon, tell me."

Kirie dexterously corkscrewed his finger, and Katze's story rushed out of Manon like air from a hot bellows.

The Manon who looked down on people as his natural right—who presumed to do it his way no matter who he slept with—that Manon had disappeared. All it took was Kirie—his junior, no less—fingering his ass to turn Manon into a sex-crazed fool.

Up until then, though Manon had allowed himself to be fellated, he'd never taken anybody inside him. He stood to inherit the crown of the Kuger clan. And people like him didn't do things like that. Giving it to somebody else was pleasurable enough, but it didn't excite him nearly as much.

But Kirie going down on him lent a whole new meaning to the term. A feeling so overwhelming, it felt as if his loins were melting. Shivers shooting up his spine as Kirie lapped at his balls like a dog. The unbearably pleasant convulsions dancing across his inner thighs as Kirie playfully nipped at him with his teeth.

He loved the way Kirie massaged him so intensely there, manhandling him and sucking on his cock. The pins and needles paraded along his spine. It felt so good he almost couldn't stand it. Every stimulation to the tip of his cock left him all the more delirious.

Manon preferred fellatio even to mounting Kirie and coming inside him. He'd spread his legs, bare his groin, and let Kirie massage his package and slobber all over him. Giving him head and plying him with his tongue until he came. Kirie never protested, sucking on him until he was dry.

The pleasure was like nothing he could achieve jacking off by himself.

And then, achieving release and half-pacified, Kirie would spread Manon's cheeks and start toying with the small bud between. Enraptured by the bliss—the sensations provoked as he swallowed up Kirie's digits enough to curl his body—in time, penetrated and



caressed by Kirie's finger and cock, the pleasure of coupling with Kirie had swept him away.

Now, tortured by Kirie's finger devoured to the knuckle, imagining something bigger and harder than his finger—Kirie's cock penetrating him—the painful longing throbbing in his groin even reached out to stab at the tip of his cock.

Kirie asked. And Manon answered, the hoarse words falling from his benumbed mouth.

As a reward, Kirie added a second finger to the one already inside him, digging and rubbing at the tender flesh, causing Manon to again elevate his hips in response to the unbearable sensations, Kirie held him tight.

The tingling numbness plunged down to the core of his brain. Manon lost all track of what his mouth was saying. Kirie was so surprised by the truths that quavering voice told him that he was momentarily rendered speechless.

*That's—that's what's really going on here?* And yet in that moment he couldn't help smiling to himself. *So Scarface Katze himself is the Tanagura rep?* A giant scandal was waiting, no doubt about it.

His shining face revealed not a trace of the kid who'd once picked at Bison's table scraps. All that remained were the hard and brazen eyes of personal ambition.

**AI NO KUSABI**

**THE SPACE BETWEEN**

Vol.5

*Darkness*

March 2009

# Afterword

Hello there.

The year is drawing rapidly to a close and I'm tying myself up in knots. To make matters worse, a second earthquake has left the house in a total mess. Oh, well. Whatever will be, will be. That's what I've come to realize when the human condition is involved.

Naturally, right up to the very end, all the work that didn't get done in the meantime left me feeling, "Deadlines? What deadlines? *La la la la la la*—"

So sorry for causing everybody so much grief!

This is part four of *Ai no Kusabi*. The Japanese title as well—*konmei*, meaning "confusion"—has come to symbolize the year's upheavals.

I was happily able to expand upon the story involving Manon and Kirie only lightly touched upon in the hardcover edition.

Or perhaps it'd be better to say that from this point on, as Guy steps back and Kirie steps forward as the character one loves to hate, I may be the only one who really enjoyed going into such detail.

In the final analysis, both Riki and Kirie possess the necessary drive to claw their way out of the slums and make something of themselves. The means and the roads they choose are diametrically opposite. And yet the weight of their respective burdens being so much different, the ways in which they steel themselves for what is to come are worlds apart as well.

It certainly might be true that a person has only two hands to hold onto the important things in life. Choosing one thing means rejecting something else. And we'll never know whether or not that choice was the correct one until afterward. But we soldier on, not wishing to look back with regrets. That is probably our best recourse.

I resolved that this year would be the year I rewarded myself, and making the desire concrete, I finally realized it.

I produced my own drama CD.

It's titled *House of Shadows*, and takes *Ai no Kusabi* as the starting point. *Ai no Kusabi* could be consigned to the science fiction genre, while *House of Shadows* is a supernatural romance. Nothing light and fluffy. Hard-hitting, real hard-boiled stuff.

If you're interested, please find out more at [www.mee-maker.com](http://www.mee-maker.com). For those of you looking for something lighter in the teenage boy category, *Children's Corner* volumes six and seven are being published by Kadokawa. Mail order only.

Kadokawa is releasing *Children's Corner Hyper 2—Crisis Point* under their Ruby imprint as well. And Tokuma should be coming out with volume 13 of *The Heartbeat of Enchantment*.

As for next year... well, right now I need to straighten up around here and pack away all those Damoclean swords hanging over my head. That should prove its own reward.

We're right down to the finish line. But before I go, I must apologize to Katsumi Michihara for causing her so much grief and thank her as always for all she's done. I've already got my shoulder to the wheel.

Until next time,

Rieko Yoshihara

November 2005